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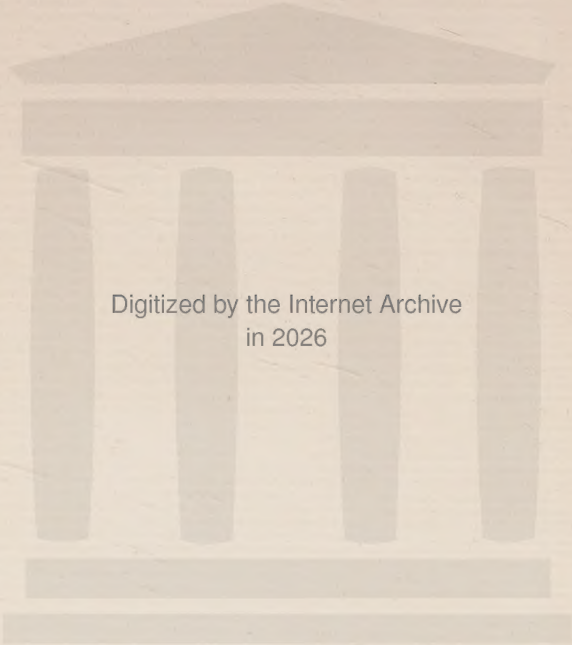
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WALTER F. ADENEY, M.A.

PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS AND CHURCH HISTORY,
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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY: EZRA AND NEHEMIAH.

THOUGH in close contact with the most perplexing problems of Old Testament literature, the main history recorded in the books of 'Ezra' and 'Nehemiah' is fixed securely above the reach of adverse criticism. Here the most cautious reader may take his stand with the utmost confidence, knowing that his feet rest on a solid rock. The curiously inartistic process adopted by the writer is in itself some guarantee of authenticity. Ambitious authors who set out with the design of creating literature—and perhaps building up a reputation for themselves by the way—may be very conscientious in their search for truth; but we cannot help suspecting that the method of melting down their materials and recasting them in the mould of their own style which they usually adopt must gravely endanger their accuracy. Nothing of the kind is attempted in this narrative. In considerable portions of it the primitive records are simply copied word for word, without the least pretence at original writing on the part of the historian. Elsewhere he has evidently kept as near as possible to the form of his materials, even when the plan of his work has necessitated some condensation or readjustment. The crudity of this procedure must be annoying to literary epicures who

prefer flavour to substance, but it should be an occasion of thankfulness on the part of those of us who wish to trace the revelation of God in the life of Israel, because it shows that we are brought as nearly as possible face to face with the facts in which that revelation was clothed.

In the first place, we have some of the very writings of Ezra and Nehemiah, the leading actors in the great drama of real life that is here set forth. We cannot doubt the genuineness of these writings. They are each of them composed in the first person singular, and they may be sharply distinguished from the remainder of the narrative, inasmuch as that is in the third person —not to mention other and finer marks of difference. Of course this implies that the whole of Ezra and Nehemiah should not be ascribed to the two men whose names the books bear in our English Bibles. The books themselves do not make any claim to be written throughout by these great men. On the contrary, they clearly hint the opposite, by the transition to the third person in those sections which are not extracted verbatim from one or other of the two authorities.

It is most probable that the Scripture books now known as Ezra and Nehemiah were compiled by one and the same person, that, in fact, they originally constituted a single work. This view was held by the scribes who arranged the Hebrew Canon, for there they appear as one book. In the Talmud they are treated as one. So they are among the early Christian writers. As late as the fifth century of our era Jerome gives the name of "Esdras" to both, describing "Nehemiah" as "The Second Book of Esdras."

Further, there seem to be good reasons for believing that the compiler of our Ezra-Nehemiah was no other

than the author of Chronicles. The repetition of the concluding passage of 2 Chronicles as the introduction to Ezra is an indication that the latter was intended to be a continuation of the Chronicler's version of the History of Israel. When we compare the two works together, we come across many indications of their agreement in spirit and style. In both we discover a disposition to hurry over secular affairs in order to dilate on the religious aspects of history. In both we meet with the same exalted estimation of The Law, the same unwearied interest in the details of temple ritual and especially in the musical arrangements of the Levites, and the same singular fascination for long lists of names, which are inserted wherever an opportunity for letting them in can be found.

Now, there are several things in our narrative that tend to show that the Chronicler belongs to a comparatively late period. Thus in Nehemiah xii. 22 he mentions the succession of priests down "to the reign of Darius the Persian." The position of this phrase in connection with the previous lists of names makes it clear that the sovereign here referred to must be Darius III., surnamed Codommanus, the last king of Persia, who reigned from B.C. 336 to B.C. 332. Then the title "the Persian" suggests the conclusion that the dynasty of Persia had passed away; so does the phrase "king of Persia," which we meet with in the Chronicler's portion of the narrative. The simple expression "the king," without any descriptive addition, would be sufficient on the lips of a contemporary. Accordingly we find that it is used in the first-person sections of Ezra-Nehemiah, and in those royal edicts that are cited in full. Again, Nehemiah xii. 11 and 22 give us the name of Jaddua in the series of high-

priests. But Jaddua lived as late as the time of Alexander; his date must be about B.C. 331.* This lands us in the Grecian period. Lastly, the references to "the days of Nehemiah" † clearly point to a writer in some subsequent age. Though it is justly urged that it was quite in accordance with custom for later scribes to work over an old book, inserting a phrase here and there to bring it up to date, the indications of the later date are too closely interwoven with the main structure of the composition to admit this hypothesis here.

Nevertheless, though we seem to be shut up to the view that the Grecian era had been reached before our book was put together, this is really only a matter of literary interest, seeing that it is agreed on all sides that the history is authentic, and that the constituent parts of it are contemporary with the events they record. The function of the compiler of such a book as this is not much more than that of an editor. It must be admitted that the date of the final editor is as late as the Macedonian Empire. The only question is whether this man was the sole editor and compiler of the narrative. We may let that point of purely literary criticism be settled in favour of the later date for the original compilation, and yet rest satisfied that we have all we want —a thoroughly genuine history in which to study the ways of God with man during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

This narrative is occupied with the Persian period of the History of Israel. It shows us points of contact between the Jews and a great Oriental Empire; but, unlike the history in the dismal Babylonian age, the

* Josephus, *Ant.*, XI. viii. 7.
† Neh. xii. 26 and 47.

course of events now moves forward among scenes of hopeful progress. The new dominion is of an Aryan stock — intelligent, appreciative, generous. Like the Christians in the time of the Apostles, the Jews now find the supreme government friendly to them, even ready to protect them from the assaults of their hostile neighbours. It is in this political relationship, and scarcely, if at all, by means of the intercommunication of ideas affecting religion, that the Persians take an important place in the story of Ezra and Nehemiah. We shall see much of their official action; we can but grope about vaguely in search of the few hints of their influence on the theology of Israel that may be looked for on the pages of the sacred narrative. Still a remarkable characteristic of the leading religious movement of this time is the Oriental and foreign locality of its source. It springs up in the breasts of Jews who are most stern in their racial exclusiveness, most relentless in their scornful rejection of any Gentile alliance. But this is on a foreign soil. It comes from Babylon, not Jerusalem. Again and again fresh impulses and new resources are brought up to the sacred city, and always from the far-off colony in the land of exile. Here the money for the cost of the rebuilding of the temple was collected; here The Law was studied and edited; here means were found for restoring the fortifications of Jerusalem. Not only did the first company of pilgrims go up from Babylon to begin a new life among the tombs of their fathers; but one after another fresh bands of emigrants, borne on new waves of enthusiasm, swept up from the apparently inexhaustible centres of Judaism in the East to rally the flagging energies of the citizens of Jerusalem. For a long while this city was only maintained with the

greatest difficulty as a sort of outpost from Babylon: it was little better than a pilgrim's camp; often it was in danger of destruction from the uncongenial character of its surroundings. Therefore it is Babylonian Judaism that here claims our attention. The mission of this great religious movement is to found and cultivate an offshoot of itself in the old country. Its beginning is at Babylon; its end is to shape the destinies of Jerusalem.

Three successive embassies from the living heart of Judaism in Babylon go up to Jerusalem, each with its own distinctive function in the promotion of the purposes of the mission. The first is led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the year B.C. 537.* The second is conducted by Ezra eighty years later. The third follows shortly after this with Nehemiah as its central figure. Each of the two first-named expeditions is a great popular migration of men, women, and children returning home from exile; Nehemiah's journey is more personal—the travelling of an officer of state with his escort. The principal events of the history spring out of these three expeditions. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are commissioned to restore the sacrifices and rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Ezra sets forth with the visible object of further ministering to the resources of the sacred shrine; but the real end that he is inwardly aiming at is the introduction of The Law to the people of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's main purpose is to rebuild the city walls, and so restore the civic character of Jerusalem and enable her to maintain her

* Allowing some months for the preparation of the expedition—and this we must do—we may safely say that it started in the year after the decree of Cyrus, which was issued in B.C. 538.

independence in spite of the opposition of neighbouring foes. In all three cases a strong religious motive lies at the root of the public action. To Ezra the priest and scribe religion was everything. He might almost have taken as his motto, "Perish the State, if the Church may be saved." He desired to absorb the State into the Church: he would permit the former to exist, indeed, as the visible vehicle of the religious life of the community; but to sacrifice the religious ideal in deference to political exigencies was a policy against which he set his face like flint when it was advocated by a latitudinarian party among the priests. The conflict which was brought about by this clash of opposing principles was the great battle of his life. Nehemiah was a statesman, a practical man, a courtier who knew the world. Outwardly his aims and methods were very different from those of the unpractical scholar. Yet the two men thoroughly understood one another. Nehemiah caught the spirit of Ezra's ideas; and Ezra, whose work came to a standstill while he was left to his own resources, was afterwards able to carry through his great religious reformation on the basis of the younger man's military and political renovation of Jerusalem.

In all this the central figure is Ezra. We are able to see the most marked results in the improved condition of the city after his capable and vigorous colleague has taken up the reins of government. But though the hand is then the hand of Nehemiah, the voice is still the voice of Ezra. Later times have exalted the figure of the famous scribe into gigantic proportions. Even as he appears on the page of history he is sufficiently great to stand out as the maker of his age.

For the Jews in all ages, and for the world at large,

the great event of this period is the adoption of The Law by the citizens of Jerusalem. Recent investigations and discussions have directed renewed attention to the publication of The Law by Ezra, and the acceptance of it on the part of Israel. It will be especially important, therefore, for us to study these things in the calm and ingenuous record of the ancient historian, where they are treated without the slightest anticipation of modern controversies. We shall have to see what hints this record affords concerning the history of The Law in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

One broad fact will grow upon us with increasing clearness as we proceed. Evidently we have here come to the watershed of Hebrew History. Up to this point all the better teachers of Israel had been toiling painfully in their almost hopeless efforts to induce the Jews to accept the unique faith of Jehovah, with its lofty claims and its rigorous restraints. That faith itself however had appeared in three forms,—as a popular cult, often degraded to the level of the local religion of heathen neighbours ; as a priestly tradition, exact and minute in its performances, but the secret of a caste ; and as a subject of prophetic instruction, instinct with moral principles of righteousness and spiritual conceptions of God, but too large and free to be reached by a people of narrow views and low attainments. With the publication of The Law by Ezra the threefold condition ceased, and henceforth there was but one type of religion for the Jews.

The question when The Law was moulded into its present shape introduces a delicate point of criticism. But the consideration of its popular reception is more within the reach of observation. In the solemn sealing of the covenant the citizens of Jerusalem—laity as well

as priests—men, women, and children—all deliberately pledged themselves to worship Jehovah according to The Law. There is no evidence to show that they had ever done so before. The narrative bears every indication of novelty. The Law is received with curiosity; it is only understood after being carefully explained by experts; when its meaning is taken in, the effect is a shock of amazement bordering on despair. Clearly this is no collection of trite precepts known and practised by the people from antiquity.

It must be remembered, on the other hand, that an analogous effect was produced by the spread of the Scriptures at the Reformation. It does not fall within the scope of our present task to pursue the inquiry whether, like the Bible in Christendom, the entire law had been in existence in an earlier age, though then neglected and forgotten. Yet even our limited period contains evidence that The Law had its roots in the past. The venerated name of Moses is repeatedly appealed to when The Law is to be enforced. Ezra never appears as a Solon legislating for his people. Still neither is he a Justinian codifying a system of legislation already recognised and adopted. He stands between the two, as the introducer of a law hitherto unpractised and even unknown. These facts will come before us more in detail as we proceed.

The period now brought before our notice is to some extent one of national revival; but it is much more important as an age of religious construction. The Jews now constitute themselves into a Church; the chief concern of their leaders is to develop their religious life and character. The charm of these times is to be found in the great spiritual awakening that inspires and shapes their history. Here we approach very near to

the Holy Presence of the Spirit of God in His glorious activity as the Lord and Giver of Life. This epoch was to Israel what Pentecost became to the Christians. Pentecost!—We have only to face the comparison to see how far the later covenant exceeded the earlier covenant in glory. To us Christians there is a hardness, a narrowness, a painful externalism in the whole of this religious movement. We cannot say that it lacks soul; but we feel that it has not the liberty of the highest spiritual vitality. It is cramped in the fetters of legal ordinances. We shall come across evidences of the existence of a liberal party that shrank from the rigour of The Law. But this party gave no signs of religious life; the freedom it claimed was not the glorious liberty of the sons of God. There is no reason to believe that the more devout people anticipated the standpoint of St. Paul and saw any imperfection in their law. To them it presented a lofty scheme of life, worthy of the highest aspiration. And there is much in their spirit that commands our admiration and even our emulation. The most obnoxious feature of their zeal is its pitiless exclusiveness. But without this quality Judaism would have been lost in the cross currents of life among the mixed populations of Palestine.

The policy of exclusiveness saved Judaism. At heart this is just an application—though a very harsh and formal application—of the principle of separation from the world which Christ and His Apostles enjoined on the Church, and the neglect of which has sometimes nearly resulted in the disappearance of any distinctive Christian truth and life, like the disappearance of a river that breaking through its banks spreads itself out in lagoons and morasses, and ends by being swallowed up in the sands of the desert.

The exterior aspect of the stern, strict Judaism of these days is by no means attractive. But the interior life of it is simply superb. It recognises the absolute supremacy of God. In the will of God it acknowledges the one unquestionable authority before which all who accept His covenant must bow; in the revealed truth of God it perceives an inflexible rule for the conduct of His people. To be pledged to allegiance to the will and law of God is to be truly consecrated to God. That is the condition voluntarily entered into by the citizens of Jerusalem in this epoch of religious awakening. A few centuries later their example was followed by the primitive Christians, who, according to the testimony of the two Bithynian handmaidens tortured by Pliny, solemnly pledged themselves to lives of purity and righteousness; again, it was imitated, though in strangely perverted guise, by anchorites and monks, by the great founders of monastic orders and their loyal disciples, and by mediæval reformers of Church discipline such as St. Bernard; still later it was followed more closely by the Protestant inhabitants of Swiss cities at the Reformation, by the early Independents at home and the Pilgrim Fathers in New England, by the Covenanters in Scotland, by the first Methodists. It is the model of Church order, and the ideal of the religious organisation of civic life. But it awaits the adequate fulfilment of its promise in the establishment of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem.

CHAPTER II.

CYRUS.

Ezra i. 1.

THE remarkable words with which the Second Book of Chronicles closes, and which are repeated in the opening verses of the Book of Ezra, afford the most striking instance on record of that peculiar connection between the destinies of the little Hebrew nation and the movements of great World Empires which frequently emerges in history. We cannot altogether set it down to the vanity of their writers, or to the lack of perspective accompanying a contracted, provincial education, that the Jews are represented in the Old Testament as playing a more prominent part on the world's stage than one to which the size of their territory—little bigger than Wales—or their military prowess would entitle them. The fact is indisputable: No doubt it is to be attributed in part to the geographical position of Palestine on the highway of the march of armies to and fro between Asia and Africa; but it must spring also in some measure from the unique qualities of the strange people who have given their religion to the most civilised societies of mankind.

In the case before us the greatest man of his age, one of the half-dozen Founders of Empires, who con-

stitute a lofty aristocracy even among sovereigns, is manifestly concerning himself very specially with the restoration of one of the smallest of the many subject races that fell into his hands when he seized the garnered spoils of previous conquerors. Whatever we may think of the precise words of his decree as this is now reported to us by a Hebrew scribe, it is unquestionable that he issued some such orders as are contained in it. Cyrus, as it now appears, was originally king of Elam, the modern Khuzistan, not of Persia, although the royal family from which he sprang was of Persian extraction. After making himself master of Persia and building up an empire in Asia Minor and the north, he swept down on to the plains of Chaldæa and captured Babylon in the year B.C. 538. To the Jews this would be the first year of his reign, because it was the first year of his rule over them, just as the year A.D. 1603 is reckoned by Englishmen as the first year of James I., because the king of Scotland then inherited the English throne. In this year the new sovereign, of his own initiative, released the Hebrew exiles, and even assisted them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their ruined temple. Such an astounding act of generosity was contrary to the precedent of other conquerors, who accepted as a matter of course the arrangement of subject races left by their predecessors; and we are naturally curious to discover the motives that prompted it.

Like our mythical King Arthur, the Cyrus of legend is credited with a singularly attractive disposition. Herodotus says the Persians regarded him as their "father" and their "shepherd." In Xenophon's romance he appears as a very kindly character. Cicero calls him the most just, wise, and amiable of rulers.

Although it cannot be dignified with the name of history, this universally accepted tradition seems to point to some foundation in fact. It is entirely in accord with the Jewish picture of the Great King. There is some reason for believing that the privilege Cyrus offered to the Jews was one in which other nations shared. On a small, broken, clay cylinder, some four inches in diameter, discovered quite recently and now deposited in the British Museum, Cyrus is represented as saying, "I assembled all those nations, and I caused them to go back to their countries." Thus the return of the Jews may be regarded as a part of a general centrifugal movement in the new Empire.

Nevertheless, the peculiar favour indicated by the decree issued to the Jews suggests something special in their case, and this must be accounted for before the action of Cyrus can be well understood.

Little or no weight can be attached to the statement of Josephus, who inserts in the very language of the decree a reference to the foretelling of the name of Cyrus by "the prophets," as a prime motive for issuing it, and adds that this was known to Cyrus by his reading the Book of Isaiah.* Always more or less untrustworthy whenever he touches the relations between his people and foreigners, the Jewish historian is even exceptionally unsatisfactory in his treatment of the Persian Period. It may be, as Ewald asserts, that Josephus is here following some Hellenistic writer; but we know nothing of his authority. There is no reference to this in our one authority, the Book of Ezra; and if it had been true there would have been every reason to publish it. Some Jews at court may have shown Cyrus the prophecies in question;

* *Ant.*, XI. i. 1, 2.

indeed it is most probable that men who wished to please him would have done so. Plato in the "Laws" represents Cyrus as honouring those who knew how to give good advice. But it is scarcely reasonable to suppose, without a particle of evidence, that a great monarch flushed with victory would set himself to carry out a prediction purporting to emanate from the Deity of one of the conquered peoples, when that prediction was distinctly in their interest, unless he was first actuated by some other considerations.

Until a few years ago it was commonly supposed that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, who was disgusted at the cruel and lustful idolatry of the Babylonians, and that when he discovered a monotheistic people oppressed by vicious heathen polytheists, he claimed religious brotherhood with them, and so came to show them singular favour. Unfortunately for his fame, this fascinating theory has been recently shattered by the discovery of the little cylinder already referred to. Here Cyrus is represented as saying that "the gods" have deserted Nabonidas—the last king of Babylon—because he has neglected their service; and that Merodach, the national divinity of Babylon, has transferred his favour to Cyrus; who now honours him with many praises. An attempt has been made to refute the evidence of this ancient record by attributing the cylinder to some priest of Bel, who, it is said, may have drawn up the inscription without the knowledge of the king, and even in direct opposition to his religious views. A most improbable hypothesis! especially as we have absolutely no grounds for the opinion that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian. The Avesta, the sacred collection of hymns which forms the basis of the Parsee scriptures, came from the far East, close to India, and it

was written in a language almost identical with Sanscrit and quite different from the Old Persian of Western Persia. We have no ground for supposing that as yet it had been adopted in the remote south-western region of Elam, where Cyrus was brought up. That monarch, it would seem, was a liberal-minded syncretist, as ready to make himself at home with the gods of the peoples he conquered as with their territories. Such a man would be astute enough to represent the indigenous divinities as diverting their favour from the fallen and therefore discredited kings he had overthrown, and transferring it to the new victor. We must therefore descend from the highlands of theology in our search for an explanation of the conduct of Cyrus. Can we find this in some department of state policy?

We learn from the latter portion of our Book of Isaiah that the Jewish captives suffered persecution under Nabonidas. It is not difficult to guess the cause of the embitterment of this king against them after they had been allowed to live in peace and prosperity under his predecessors. Evidently the policy of Nebuchadnezzar, which may have succeeded with some other races, had broken down in its application to a people with such tough national vitality as that of the Jews. It was found to be impossible to eradicate their patriotism—or rather the patriotism of the faithful nucleus of the nation, impossible to make Jerusalem forgotten by the waters of Babylon. This ancient "Semitic question" was the very reverse of that which now vexes Eastern Europe, because in the case of the Jews at Babylon the troublesome aliens were only desirous of liberty to depart; but it sprang from the same essential cause the separateness of the Hebrew race.

Now things often present themselves in a true light

to a new-comer who approaches them with a certain mental detachment, although they may have been grievously misapprehended by those people among whom they have slowly shaped themselves. Cyrus was a man of real genius; and immediately he came upon the scene he must have perceived the mistake of retaining a restless, disaffected population, like a foreign body rankling in the very heart of his empire. Moreover, to allow the Jews to return home would serve a double purpose. While it would free the Euphrates Valley from a constant source of distress, it would plant a grateful, and therefore loyal, people on the western confines of the empire—perhaps, as some have thought, to be used as outworks and a basis of operations in a projected campaign against Egypt. Thus a far-sighted statesman might regard the liberation of the Jews as a stroke of wise policy. But we must not make too much of this. The restored Jews were a mere handful of religious devotees, scarcely able to hold their own against the attacks of neighbouring villages; and while they were permitted to build their temple, nothing was said in the royal rescript about fortifying their city. So feeble a colony could not have been accounted of much strategic importance by such a master of armies as Cyrus. Again, we know from the "Second Isaiah" that, when the Persian war-cloud was hovering on the horizon, the Jewish exiles hailed it as the sign of deliverance from persecution. The invader who brought destruction to Babylon promised relief to her victims; and the lofty strains of the prophet bespeak an inspired perception of the situation which encouraged higher hopes. A second discovery in the buried library of bricks is that of a small flat tablet, also recently unearthed like the cylinder of

Cyrus, which records this very section of the history of Babylon. Here it is stated that Cyrus intrigued with a disaffected party within the city. Who would be so likely as the persecuted Jews to play this part? Further, the newly found Babylonian record makes it clear that Herodotus was mistaken in his famous account of the siege of Babylon where he connected it with the coming of Cyrus. He must have misapprehended a report of one of the two sieges under Darius, when the city had revolted and was recaptured by force, for we now know that after a battle fought in the open country Cyrus was received into the city without striking another blow. He would be likely to be in a gracious mood then, and if he knew there were exiles, languishing in captivity, who hailed his advent as that of a deliverer, even apart from the question whether they had previously opened up negotiations with him, he could not but look favourably upon them; so that generosity and perhaps gratitude combined with good policy to govern his conduct. Lastly, although he was not a theological reformer, he seems to have been of a religious character, according to his light, and therefore it is not unnatural to suppose that he may have heartily thrown himself into a movement of which his wisdom approved, and with which all his generous instincts sympathised. Thus, after all, there may be something in the old view, if only we combine it with our newer information. Under the peculiar political circumstances of his day, Cyrus may have been prepared to welcome the prophetic assurance that he was a heaven-sent shepherd, if some of the Jews had shown it him. Even without any such assurance, other conquerors have been only too ready to flatter themselves that they were executing a sacred mission.

These considerations do not in the least degree limit the Divine element of the narrative as that is brought forward by the Hebrew historian. On the contrary, they give additional importance to it. The chronicler sees in the decree of Cyrus and its issues an accomplishment of the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah. Literally he says that what happens is in order that the word of the Lord may *be brought to an end.* It is in the "*fulness* of the time," as the advent of Christ was later in another relation.* The writer seems to have in mind the passage—"And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it desolate for ever"; † as well as another prophecy—"For thus saith the Lord, After seventy years be accomplished for Babylon, I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place." ‡ Now if we do not accept the notion of Josephus that Cyrus was consciously and purposely fulfilling these predictions, we do not in any way diminish the fact that the deliverance came from God. If we are driven to the conclusion that Cyrus was not solely or chiefly actuated by religious motives, or even if we take his action to be *purely* one of state policy, the ascription of this inferior position to Cyrus only heightens the wonderful glory of God's overruling providence. Nebuchadnezzar was described as God's

* Gal. iv. 4. † Jer. xxv. 11, 12.
‡ Jer. xxix. 10.

"servant" * because, although he was a bad man, only pursuing his own wicked way, yet, all unknown to him, that way was made to serve God's purposes. Similarly Cyrus, who is not a bad man, is God's "Shepherd," when he delivers the suffering flock from the wolf and sends it back to the fold, whether he aims at obeying the will of God or not. It is part of the great revelation of God in history, that He is seen working out His supreme purposes in spite of the ignorance and sometimes even by means of the malice of men. Was not this the case in the supreme event of history, the crucifixion of our Lord? If the cruelty of Nebuchadnezzar and the feebleness of Pilate could serve God, so could the generosity of Cyrus.

The question of the chronological exactness of this fulfilment of prophecy troubles some minds that are anxious about Biblical arithmetic. The difficulty is to arrive at the period of seventy years. It would seem that this could only be done by some stretching at both ends of the exile. We must begin with Nebuchadnezzar's first capture of Jerusalem and the first carrying away of a small body of royal hostages to Babylon in the year B.C. 606. Even then we have only sixty-eight years to the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, which happened in B.C. 538. Therefore to get the full seventy years it is proposed to extend the exile till the year B.C. 536, which is the date of the commencement of Cyrus's sole rule. But there are serious difficulties in these suggestions. In his prediction of the seventy years Jeremiah plainly refers to the complete overthrow of the nation with the strong words, "This whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment." As a

* Jer. xxvii. 6.

matter of fact, the exile only began in earnest with the final siege of Jerusalem, which took place in B.C. 588. Then Cyrus actually began his reign over the Jews in B.C. 538, when he took Babylon, and he issued his edict in his first year. Thus the real exile as a national trouble seems to have occupied fifty years, or, reckoning a year for the issuing and execution of the edict, fifty-one years. Instead of straining at dates, is it not more simple and natural to suppose that Jeremiah gave a round figure to signify a period which would cover the lifetime of his contemporaries, at all events? However this may be, nobody can make a grievance out of the fact that the captivity may not have been quite so lengthy as the previous warnings of it foreshadowed. Tillotson wisely remarked that there is this difference between the Divine promises and the Divine threatenings, that while God pledges His faithfulness to the full extent of the former, He is not equally bound to the perfect accomplishment of the latter. If the question of dates shows a little discrepancy, what does this mean but that God is so merciful as not always to exact the last farthing? Moreover it should be remarked that the point of Jeremiah's prophecy is not the exact length of the captivity, but the certain termination of it after a long while. The time is fulfilled when the end has come.

But the action of Cyrus is not only regarded as the accomplishment of prophecy; it is also attributed to the direct influence of God exercised on the Great King, for we read "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia," etc. It would indicate the radical scepticism which is too often hidden under the guise of a rigorous regard for correct belief, to maintain that because we now know Cyrus to have been a polytheist

his spirit could not have been stirred up by the true God. It is not the teaching of the Bible that God confines His influence on the hearts of men to Jews and Christians. Surely we cannot suppose that the Father of all mankind rigidly refuses to hold any intercourse with the great majority of His children—never whispers them a guiding word in their anxiety and perplexity, never breathes into them a helpful impulse, even in their best moments, when they are earnestly striving to do right. In writing to the Romans St. Paul distinctly argues on the ground that God has revealed Himself to the heathen world,* and in the presence of Cornelius St. Peter as distinctly asserts that God accepts the devout and upright of all nations.† Here even in the Old Testament it is recognised that God moves the king of Persia. This affords a singular encouragement for prayer, because it suggests that God has access to those who are far out of our reach; that He quite sets aside the obstruction of intermediaries—secretaries, chamberlains, grand-viziers, and all the *entourage* of a court; that He goes straight into the audience chamber, making direct for the inmost thoughts and feelings of the man whom He would influence. The wonder of it is that God condescends to do this even with men who know little of Him; but it should be remembered that though He is strange to many men, none of them are strange to Him. The Father knows the children who do not know Him. It may be remarked, finally, on this point, that the special Divine influence now referred to is dynamic rather than illuminating. To stir up the spirit is to move

* Rom. i. 19.

† Acts x. 34, 35.

to activity. God not only teaches; He quickens. In the case of Cyrus, the king used his own judgment and acted on his own opinions; yet the impulse which drove him was from God. That was everything. We live in a God-haunted world: why then are we slow to take the first article of our creed in its full meaning? Is it so difficult to believe in God when all history is alive with His presence?

CHAPTER III.

THE ROYAL EDICT.

Ezra i. 2-4, 7-11.

IT has been asserted that the Scripture version of the edict of Cyrus cannot be an exact rendering of the original, because it ascribes to the Great King some knowledge of the God of the Jews, and even some faith in Him. For this reason it has been suggested that either the chronicler or some previous writer who translated the decree out of the Persian language, in which of course it must have been first issued, inserted the word Jehovah in place of the name of Ormazd or some other god worshipped by Cyrus, and shaped the phrases generally so as to commend them to Jewish sympathies. Are we driven to this position? We have seen that when Cyrus got possession of Babylon he had no scruple in claiming the indigenous divinity Merodach as his god. Is it not then entirely in accordance with his eclectic habit of mind—not to mention his diplomatic art in humouring the prejudices of his subjects—that he should draw up a decree in which he designed to show favour to an exceptionally religious people in language that would be congenial to them? Like most men of higher intelligence even among polytheistic races, Cyrus may have believed in one supreme Deity, who, he may have supposed, was

worshipped under different names by different nations. The final clause of Ezra i. 3 is misleading, as it stands in the Authorised Version; and the Revisers, with their habitual caution, have only so far improved upon it as to permit the preferable rendering to appear in the margin, where we have generally to look for the opinions of the more scholarly as well as the more courageous critics. Yet even the Authorised Version renders the same words correctly in the very next verse. There is no occasion to print the clause, "He is the God," as a parenthesis, so as to make Cyrus inform the world that Jehovah is the one real divinity. The more probable rendering in idea is also the more simple one in construction. Removing the superfluous brackets, we read right on: "He is the God which is in Jerusalem"—*i.e.*, we have an indication who "Jehovah" is for the information of strangers to the Jews who may read the edict. With this understanding let us examine the leading items of the decree. It was proclaimed by the mouth of king's messengers, and it was also preserved in writing, so that possibly the original inscription may be recovered from among the burnt clay records that lie buried in the ruins of Persian cities. The edict is addressed to the whole empire. Cyrus announces to all his subjects his intention to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Then he specialises the aim of the decree by granting a licence to the Jews to go up to Jerusalem and undertake this work. It is a perfectly free offer to all Jews in exile without exception. "Who is there among you"—*i.e.*, among all the subjects of the empire—"of all His" (Jehovah's) "people, his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem," etc. In particular we may observe the following points:—

First, Cyrus begins by acknowledging that "the God of Heaven"—whom he identifies with the Hebrew "Jehovah," in our version of the edict—has given him his dominions. It is possible to treat this introductory sentence as a superficial formula; but there is no reason for so ungenerous an estimate of it. If we accept the words in their honest intention, we must see in them a recognition of the hand of God in the setting up of kingdoms. Two opposite kinds of experience awaken in men a conviction of God's presence in their lives—great calamities and great successes. The influence of the latter experience is not so often acknowledged as that of the former, but probably it is equally effective, at least in extreme instances. There is something awful in the success of a world-conqueror. When the man is a destroyer, spreading havoc and misery, like Attila, he regards himself as a "Scourge of God"; and when he is a vulgar impersonation of selfish greed like Napoleon, he thinks he is swept on by a mighty tide of destiny. In both instances the results are too stupendous to be attributed to purely human energy. But in the case of Cyrus, an enlightened and noble-minded hero is bringing liberty and favour to the victims of a degraded tyranny, so that he is hailed by some of them as the Anointed King raised up by their God, and therefore it is not unnatural that he should ascribe his brilliant destiny to a Divine influence.

Secondly, Cyrus actually asserts that God has charged him to build Him a temple at Jerusalem. Again, this may be the language of princely courtesy; but the noble spirit which breathes through the decree encourages us to take a higher view of it, and to refrain from reading minimising comments between the lines. It is probable that those eager, patriotic

Jews who had got the ear of Cyrus—or he would never have issued such a decree as this—may have urged their suit by showing him predictions like that of Isaiah xliv. 28, in which God describes Himself as One "that saith of Cyrus, He is My shepherd, and shall perform all My pleasure : even saying of Jerusalem, Let her be built; and, Let the foundations of the temple be laid." Possibly Cyrus is here alluding to that very utterance, although, as we have seen, Josephus is incorrect in inserting a reference to Hebrew prophecy in the very words of the decree, and in suggesting that the fulfilment of prophecy was the chief end Cyrus had in view.

It is a historical fact that Cyrus did help to build the temple ; he supplied funds from the public treasury for that object. We can understand his motives for doing so. If he desired the favour of the God of the Jews, he would naturally aid in restoring His shrine. Nabonidas had fallen, it was thought, through neglecting the worship of the gods. Cyrus seems to have been anxious to avoid this mistake, and to have given attention to the cultivation of their favour. If, as seems likely, some of the Jews had impressed his mind with the greatness of Jehovah, he might have desired to promote the building of the temple at Jerusalem with exceptional assiduity.

In the next place, Cyrus gives the captive Jews leave to go up to Jerusalem. The edict is purely permissive. There is to be no expulsion of Jews from Babylon. Those exiles who did not choose to avail themselves of the boon so eagerly coveted by the patriotic few were allowed to remain unmolested in peace and prosperity. The restoration was voluntary. This free character of the movement would give it a

vigour quite out of proportion to the numbers of those who took part in it, and would, at the same time, ensure a certain elevation of tone and spirit. It is an image of the Divine restoration of souls, which is confined to those who accept it of their own free will.

Further, the object of the return, as it is distinctly specified, is simply to rebuild the temple, not—at all events in the first instance—to build up and fortify a city on the ruins of Jerusalem; much less does it imply a complete restoration of Palestine to the Jews, with a wholesale expulsion of its present inhabitants from their farms and vineyards. Cyrus does not seem to have contemplated any such revolution. The end in view was neither social nor political, but purely religious. That more would come out of it, that the returning exiles must have houses to live in and must protect those houses from the brigandage of the Bedouin, and that they must have fields producing food to support them and their families, are inevitable consequences. Here is the germ and nucleus of a national restoration. Still it remains true that the immediate object—the only object named in the decree—is the rebuilding of the temple. Thus we see from the first that the idea which characterises the restoration is religious. The exiles return as a Church. The goal of their pilgrimage is a holy site. The one work they are to aim at achieving is to further the worship of their God.

Lastly, the inhabitants of the towns in which the Jews have been settled are directed to make contributions towards the work. It is not quite clear whether these "Benevolences" are to be entirely voluntary. A royal exhortation generally assumes something of the character of a command. Probably rich men were requisitioned to assist in providing the gold and silver

and other stores, together with the beasts of burden which would be needed for the great expedition. This was to supplement what Cyrus calls "the free-will offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem"—*i.e.*, either the gifts of the Jews who remained in Babylon, or possibly his own contribution from the funds of the state. We are reminded of the Hebrews spoiling the Egyptians at the Exodus. The prophet Haggai saw in this a promise of further supplies, when the wealth of foreign nations would be poured into the temple treasury in donations of larger dimensions from the heathen. "For thus saith the Lord of hosts," he writes, "Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; . . . and the desirable things of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts." *

The assumed willingness of their neighbours to contribute at a hint from the king suggests that the exiles were not altogether unpopular. On the other hand, it is quite possible that, under the oppression of Nabonidas, they had suffered much wrong from these neighbours. A public persecution always entails a large amount of private cruelty, because the victims are not protected by the law from the greed and petty spite of those who are mean enough to take advantage of their helpless condition. Thus it may be that Cyrus was aiming at a just return in his recommendation to his subjects to aid the Jews.

Such was the decree. Now let us look at the execution of it.

* Hag. ii. 6-8.

In the first place, there was a ready response on the part of some of the Jews, seen especially in the conduct of their leaders, who "rose up," bestirring themselves to prepare for the expedition, like expectant watchers released from their weary waiting and set free for action. The social leaders are mentioned first, which is a clear indication that the theocracy, so characteristic of the coming age, was not yet the recognised order. A little later the clergy will be placed before the laity, but at present the laity are still named before the clergy. The order is domestic. The leaders are the heads of great families—"the chief of the fathers." For such people to be named first is also an indication that the movement did not originate in the humbler classes. Evidently a certain aristocratic spirit permeated it. The wealthy merchants may have been loath to leave their centres of commerce, but the nobility of blood and family were at the head of the crusade. We have not yet reached the age of the democracy. It is clear, further, that there was some organisation among the exiles. They were not a mere crowd of refugees. The leaders were of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. We shall have to consider the relation of the Ten Tribes to the restoration later on; here it may be enough to observe in passing that representatives of the Southern Kingdom take the lead in a return to Jerusalem, the capital of that kingdom. Next come the ecclesiastical leaders, the priests and Levites. Already we find these two orders named separately—an important fact in relation to the development of Judaism that will meet us again, with some hints here and there to throw light upon the meaning of it.

There is another side to this response. It was by no means the case that the whole of the exiles rose up in

answer to the edict of Cyrus; only those leaders and only those people responded "whose spirit God had raised." The privilege was offered to all the Jews, but it was not accepted by all. We cannot but be impressed by the religious faith and the inspired insight of our historian in this matter. He saw that Cyrus issued his edict because the Lord had stirred up his spirit; now he attributes the prompting to make use of the proffered liberty to a similar Divine influence. Thus the return was a movement of heaven-sent impulses throughout. Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones showed the deplorable condition of the Northern Kingdom in his day—stripped bare, shattered to fragments, scattered abroad. The condition of Judah was only second to this ghastly national ruin. But now to Judah there had come the breath of the Divine Spirit which Ezekiel saw promised for Israel, and a living army was rising up in new energy. Here we may discover the deeper, the more vital source of the return. Without this the edict of Cyrus would have perished as a dead letter. Even as it was, only those people who felt the breath of the Divine afflatus rose up for the arduous undertaking. So to-day there is no return to the heavenly Jerusalem and no rebuilding the fallen temple of human nature except in the power of the Spirit of God. Regeneration always goes hand in hand with redemption—the work of the Spirit with the work of the Christ. In the particular case before us, the special effect of the Divine influence is "to raise the spirit"—*i.e.*, to infuse life, to rouse to activity and hope and high endeavour. A people thus equipped is fit for any expedition of toil or peril. Like Gideon's little, sifted army, the small band of inspired men who rose up to accept the decree of Cyrus carried within their breasts

a superhuman power, and therefore a promise of ultimate success. The aim with which they set out confirmed the religious character of the whole enterprise. They accepted the limitations and they gladly adopted the one definite purpose suggested in the edict of Cyrus. They proceeded "to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." This was their only confessed aim. It would have been impossible for patriots such as these Jews were not to feel some national hopes and dreams stirring within them; still we have no reason to believe that the returning exiles were not loyal to the spirit of the decree of the Great King. The religious aim was the real occasion of the expedition. So much the more need was there to go in the Spirit and strength of God. Only they whose spirit God has raised are fit to build God's temple, because work for God must be done in the Spirit of God.

Secondly, the resident neighbours fell in with the recommendation of the king ungrudgingly, and gave rich contributions for the expedition. They could not go themselves, but they could have a share in the work by means of their gifts—as the home Church can share in the foreign mission she supports. The acceptance of these bounties by the Jews does not well accord with their subsequent conduct when they refused the aid of their Samaritan neighbours in the actual work of building the temple. It has an ugly look, as though they were willing to take help from all sources excepting where any concessions in return would be expected on the part of those who were befriending them. However, it is just to remember that the aid was invited and offered by Cyrus, not solicited by the Jews.

Thirdly, the execution of the decree appears to have

been honestly and effectively promoted by its author. In accordance with his generous encouragement of the Jews to rebuild their temple, Cyrus restored the sacred vessels that had been carried off by Nebuchadnezzar on the occasion of the first Chaldæan raid on Jerusalem, and deposited in a temple at Babylon nearly seventy years before the time of the return. No doubt these things were regarded as of more importance than other spoils of war. It would be supposed that the patron god of the conquered people was humiliated when the instruments of his worship were offered to Bel or Nebo. Perhaps it was thought that some charm attaching to them would bring luck to the city in which they were guarded. When Nabonidas was seized with frantic terror at the approach of the Persian hosts, he brought the idols of the surrounding nations to Babylon for his protection. The reference to the temple vessels, and the careful and detailed enumeration of them, without the mention of any image, is a clear proof that, although before the captivity the majority of the Jews may have consisted of idolaters, there was no idol in the temple at Jerusalem. Had there been one there Nebuchadnezzar would most certainly have carried it off as the greatest trophy of victory. In default of images, he had to make the most of the gold and silver plate used in the sacrificial ceremonies.

Viewed in this connection, the restitution of the stolen vessels by Cyrus appears to be more than an act of generosity or justice. A certain religious import belongs to it. It put an end to an ancient insult offered by Babylon to the God of Israel; and it might be taken as an act of homage offered to Jehovah by Cyrus. Yet it was only a restitution, a return of what was God's before, and so a type of every gift man makes to God.

It has been noticed that the total number of the vessels restored does not agree with the sum of the numbers of the several kinds of vessels. The total is 5400; but an addition of the list of the vessels only amounts to 2499. Perhaps the less valuable articles are omitted from the detailed account; or possibly there is some error of transcription, and if so the question is, in which direction shall we find it? It may be that the total was too large. On the other hand, in 1 Esdras nearly the same high total is given—viz., 5469—and there the details are made to agree with it by an evidently artificial manipulation of the numbers.* This gives some probability to the view that the total is correct, and that the error must be in the numbers of the several items. The practical importance of these considerations is that they lead us to a high estimate of the immense wealth of the Old Temple treasures. Thus they suggest the reflection that much devotion and generosity had been shown in collecting such stores of gold and silver in previous ages. They help us to picture the sumptuous ritual of the first temple, with the "barbaric splendour" of a rich display of the precious metals. Therefore they show that the generosity of Cyrus in restoring so great a hoard was genuine and considerable. It might have been urged that after the treasures had been lying for two generations in a heathen temple the original owners had lost all claim upon them. It might have been said that they had been contaminated by this long residence among the abominations of Babylonian idolatry. The restoration of them swept away all such ideas. What was once God's belongs to Him by right for ever. His property is inalienable;

* 1 Esdras ii. 14.

His claims never lapse with time, never fail through change.

It is not without significance that the treasurer who handed over their temple-property to the Jews was named "Mithredath"—a word that means "given by Mithra," or "devoted to Mithra." This suggests that the Persian sun-god was honoured among the servants of Cyrus, and yet that one who by name at least was especially associated with this divinity was constrained to honour the God of Israel. Next to Judaism and Christianity, the worship of Mithra showed the greatest vitality of all religions in Western Asia, and later even in Europe. So vigorous was it as recently as the commencement of the Christian era, that M. Renan has remarked, that if the Roman world had not become Christian it would have become Mithrastic. In those regions where the dazzling radiance and burning heat of the sun are felt as they are not even imagined in our chill, gloomy climate, it was naturally supposed that if any visible God existed He must be found in the great fiery centre of the world's light and life. Our own day has seen the scientific development of the idea that the sun's force is the source of all the energy of nature. In the homage paid by one of the ancient followers of Mithra, the sun-god, to the God of Israel, may we not see an image of the recognition of the claims of the Supreme by our priests of the sun—Kepler, Newton, Faraday? Men must be more blind than the slaves of Mithra if they cannot recognise an awful, invisible energy behind and above the forces of the solar system —nay more, a living Spirit—God!

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECOND EXODUS.

Ezra ii. 1-67.

THE journey of the returning exiles from Babylon has some points of resemblance to the exodus of their fathers from Egypt. On both occasions the Israelites had been suffering oppression in a foreign land. Deliverance had come to the ancient Hebrews in so wonderful a way that it could only be described as a miracle of God: no material miracle was recorded of the later movement; and yet it was so marvellously providential that the Jews were constrained to acknowledge that the hand of God was not less concerned in it.

But there were great differences between the two events. In the original *Hegira* of the Hebrews a horde of slaves was fleeing from the land of their brutal masters; in the solemn pilgrimage of the second exodus the Jews were able to set out with every encouragement from the conqueror of their national enemy. On the other hand, while the flight from Egypt led to liberty, the expedition from Babylon did not include an escape from the foreign yoke. The returning exiles were described as "children of the province" *—*i.e.*, of the Persian province of Judæa—

* Ezra ii. 1.

and their leader bore the title of a Persian governor.* Zerubbabel was no new Moses. The first exodus witnessed the birth of a nation; the second saw only a migration within the boundaries of an empire, sanctioned by the ruler because it did not include the deliverance of the subject people from servitude.

In other respects the condition of the Israelites who took part in the later expedition contrasts favourably with that of their ancestors under Moses. In the arts of civilisation, of course, they were far superior to the crushed Egyptian bondmen. But the chief distinction lay in the matter of religion. At length, in these days of Cyrus, the people were ripe to accept the faith of the great teachers who hitherto had been as voices crying in the wilderness. This fact signalises the immense difference between the Jews in every age previous to the exile, and the Jews of the return. In earlier periods they appear as a kingdom, but not as a Church; in the later age they are no longer a kingdom, but they have become a Church. The kingdom had been mainly heathenish and idolatrous in its religion, and most abominably corrupt in its morals, with only a thin streak of purer faith and conduct running through the course of its history. But the new Church, formed out of captives purified in the fires of persecution, consisted of a body of men and women who heartily embraced the religion to which but few of their forefathers had attained, and who were even ready to welcome a more rigorous development of its cult. Thus they became a highly developed Church. They were consolidated into a Puritan Church in discipline, and a High Church in ritual.

* Tirshatha. Ezra ii. 63.

It must be borne in mind that only a fraction of the Jews in the East went back to Palestine. Nor were they who tarried, in all cases, the more worldly, enamoured of the fleshpots. In the Talmud it is said that only the chaff returned, while the wheat remained behind. Both Ezra and Nehemiah sprang from families still residing in the East long after the return under Zerubbabel.

It is in accordance with these conditions that we come across one of the most curious characteristics of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah—a characteristic which they share with Chronicles, viz., the frequent insertion of long lists of names.

Thus the second chapter of Ezra contains a list of the families who went up to Jerusalem in response to the edict of Cyrus. One or two general considerations arise here.

Since it was not a whole nation that migrated from the plains of Babylon across the great Syrian desert, but only some fragments of a nation, we shall not have to consider the fortunes and destinies of a composite unity, such as is represented by a kingdom. The people of God must now be regarded disjunctively. It is not the blessing of Israel, or the blessing of Judah, that faith now anticipates; but the blessing of those men, women, and children who fear God and walk in His ways, though, of course, for the present they are all confined to the limits of the Jewish race.

On the other hand, it is to be observed that this individualism was not absolute. The people were arranged according to their families, and the names that distinguished the families were not those of the present heads of houses, but the names of ancestors, possibly of captives taken down to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

As some of these names occur in later expeditions, it is plain that the whole of the families they represented were not found in the first body of pilgrims. Still the people were grouped in family order. The Jews anticipated the modern verdict of sociology, that the social unit is the family, not the individual. Judaism was, through and through, a domestic religion.

Further, it is to be noted that a sort of caste feeling was engendered in the midst of the domestic arrangement of the people. It emerges already in the second chapter of Ezra in the cases of families that could not trace their genealogy, and it bears bitter fruit in some pitiable scenes in the later history of the returned people. Not only national rights, but also religious privileges, come more and more to depend on purity of birth and descent. Religion is viewed as a question of blood relationship. Thus even with the very appearance of that new-born individualism which might be expected to counteract it, even when the recovered people is composed entirely of volunteers, a strong racial current sets in, which grows in volume until in the days of our Lord the fact of a man's being a Jew is thought a sufficient guarantee of his enjoying the favour of Heaven, until in our own day such a book as "Daniel Deronda" portrays the race-enthusiasm of the Israelite as the very heart and essence of his religion.

We have three copies of the list of the returning exiles—one in Ezra ii., the second in Nehemiah vii., and the third in 1 Esdras v. They are evidently all of them transcripts of the same original register; but though they agree in the main, they differ in details, giving some variation in the names and considerable diversity in the numbers—Esdras coming nearer to Ezra than to Nehemiah, as we might expect. The total, however,

is the same in every case, viz., 42,360 (besides 7337 servants)—a large number, which shows how important the expedition was considered to be.

The name of Zerubbabel appears first. He was the lineal descendant of the royal house, the heir to the throne of David. This is a most significant fact. It shows that the exiles had retained some latent national organisation, and it gives a faint political character to the return, although, as we have already observed, the main object of it was religious. To fervent readers of old prophecies strange hopes would dawn, hopes of the Messiah whose advent Isaiah, in particular, had predicted. Was this new shoot from the stock of David indeed the Lord's Anointed? Those who secretly answered the question to themselves in the affirmative were doomed to much perplexity and not a little disappointment. Nevertheless Zerubbabel was a lower, a provisional, a temporary Messiah. God was educating His people through their illusions. As one by one the national heroes failed to satisfy the large hopes of the prophets, they were left behind, but the hopes still maintained their unearthly vitality. Hezekiah, Josiah, Zerubbabel, the Maccabees all passed, and in passing they all helped to prepare for One who alone could realise the dreams of seers and singers in all the best ages of Hebrew thought and life.

Still the bulk of the people do not seem to have been dominated by the Messianic conception. It is one characteristic of the return that the idea of the personal, God-sent, but human Messiah recedes; and another, older, and more persistent Jewish hope comes to the front—viz., the hope in God Himself as the Saviour of His people and their Vindicator. Cyrus could not have suspected any political designs, or he would not

have made Zerubbabel the head of the expedition. Evidently "Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah," to whom Cyrus handed over the sacred vessels of the temple, is the same man as Zerubbabel, because in v. 16 we read that Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the temple, while in iii. 8 this work is ascribed to Zerubbabel, with whom the origin of the work is again connected in v. 2.

The second name is Jeshua.* The man who bears it was afterwards the high-priest at Jerusalem. It is impossible to say whether he had exercised any sacerdotal functions during the exile; but his prominent place shows that honour was now offered to his priesthood. Still he comes after the royal prince.

Then follow nine names without any description.† Nehemiah's list includes another name, which seems to have dropped out of the list in Ezra. These, together with the two already mentioned, make an exact dozen. It cannot be an accident that twelve names stand at the head of the list; they must be meant to represent the twelve tribes—like the twelve apostles in the Gospels, and the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem in the Apocalypse. Thus it is indicated that the return is for all Israel, not exclusively for the Judæan Hebrews. Undoubtedly the bulk of the pilgrims were descendants of captives from the Southern Kingdom.‡ The dispersion of the Northern Kingdom had begun two centuries earlier than Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Judæa; it

* This name is a later form of "Joshua"; the older form of the name is used for the same person in Hag. i. 1, 14, and Zech. iii. 1.

† Of course the Nehemiah and Mordecai in this list are different persons from those who bear the same names in the Books of Nehemiah and Esther and belong to later dates.

‡ See Ezra i. 5.

had been carried on by successive removals of the people in successive wars. Probably most of these early exiles had been driven farther north than those districts which were assigned to the Judæan captives; probably, too, they had been scattered far and wide; lastly, we know that they had been sunken in an idolatrous imitation of the manners and customs of their heathen neighbours, so that there was little to differentiate them from the people among whom they were domiciled. Under all these circumstances, is it remarkable that the ten tribes have disappeared from the observation of the world? They have vanished, but only as the Goths have vanished in Italy, as the Huguenot refugees have vanished in England—by mingling with the resident population. We have not to search for them in Tartary, or South America, or any other remote region of the four continents, because we have no reason to believe that they are now a separate people.

Still a very small "Remnant" was faithful. This "Remnant" was welcome to find its way back to Palestine with the returning Judæans. As the immediate object of the expedition was to rebuild the temple at the rival capital of Jerusalem, it was not to be expected that patriots of the Northern Kingdom would be very eager to join it. Yet some descendants of the ten tribes made their way back. Even in New Testament times the genealogy of the prophetess Anna was reckoned from the tribe of Asher.* It is most improbable that the twelve leaders were actually descendants of the twelve tribes. But just as in the case of the apostles, whom we cannot regard as thus

* Luke ii. 36.

descended, they represented all Israel. Their position at the head of the expedition proclaimed that the "middle wall of partition" was broken down. Thus we see that redemption tends to liberalise the redeemed, that those who are restored to God are also brought back to the love of their brethren.

The list that follows the twelve is divisible into two sections. First, we have a number of families; then there is a change in the tabulation, and the rest of the people are arranged according to their cities. The most simple explanation of this double method is that the families constitute the Jerusalem citizens.

The towns named in the second division are all situated in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem. The only part of Palestine as yet restored to the Jews was Jerusalem, with the towns in its vicinity. The southern half of Judæa remained in the hands of the Edomites, who begrudged to the Jews even the resumption of the northern portion—and very naturally, seeing that the Edomites had held it for half a century, a time which gives some assurance of permanent possession. This must be borne in mind when we come across the troubles between the returned exiles and their neighbours in Palestine. We can never understand a quarrel until we have heard both sides. There is no Edomite history of the wars of Israel. No doubt such a history would put another face on the events—just as a Chinese history of the English wars in the East would do, to the shame of the Christian nation.

After the leaders and the people generally come the successive orders of the temple ministry. We begin with the priests, and among these a front rank is given to the house of Jeshua. The high-priest himself had been named earlier, next to Zerubbabel, among the

leaders of the nation, so distinct was his position from that of the ordinary priesthood. Next to the priests we have the Levites, who are now sharply separated from the first order of the ministry. The very small number of Levites in comparison with the large number of priests is startling—over four thousand priests and only seventy-four Levites! The explanation of this anomaly may be found in what had been occurring in Chaldæa. Ezekiel declared that the Levites were to be degraded because of their sinful conduct.* We see from the arrangement in Ezra that the prophet's message was obeyed. The Levites were now separated from the priests, and set down to a lower function. This could not have been acceptable to them. Therefore it is not at all surprising that the majority of them held aloof from the expedition for rebuilding the temple in sullen resentment, or at best in cool indifference, refusing to take part in a work the issue of which would exhibit their humiliation to menial service. But the seventy-four had grace to accept their lowly lot.

The Levites are not set in the lowest place. They are distinguished from several succeeding orders. The singers, the children of Asaph, were really Levites; but they form a separate and important class, for the temple service was to be choral—rich and gladsome. The door-keepers are a distinct order, lowly but honourable, for they are devoted to the service of God, for whom all work is glorious.

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

Next come the Nethinims, or temple-helots. These seem to have been aborigines of Canaan who had been pressed into the service of the old Jerusalem

* Ezek. xliv. 9-16.

temple, like the Gibeonites, the hewers of wood and drawers of water. After the Nethinims come "the children of Solomon's servants," another order of slaves, apparently the descendants of the war captives whom Solomon had assigned to the work of building the temple. It shows what thorough organisation was preserved among the captives that these bondsmen were retained in their original position and brought back to Jerusalem. To us this is not altogether admirable. We may be grieved to see slavery thus enlisted in the worship of God. But we must recollect that even with the Christian gospel in her hand, for centuries, the Church had her slaves, the monasteries their serfs. No idea is of slower growth than the idea of the brotherhood of man.

So far all was in order; but there were exceptional cases. Some of the people could not prove their Israelite descent, and accordingly they were set aside from their brethren. Some of the priests even could not trace their genealogy. Their condition was regarded as more serious, for the right of office was purely hereditary. The dilemma brought to light a sad sense of loss. If only there were a priest with the Urim and Thummim, this antique augury of flashing gems might settle the difficulty! But such a man was not to be found. The Urim and Thummim, together with the Ark and the Shekinah, are named by the rabbis among the precious things that were never recovered. The Jews looked back with regret to the wonderful time when the privilege of consulting an oracle had been within the reach of their ancestors. Thus they shared the universal instinct of mankind that turns fondly to the past for memories of a golden age, the glories of which have faded and left us only the dingy

scenes of every-day life. In this instinct we may detect a transference to the race of the vaguely perceived personal loss of each man as he reflects on those far-off, dream-like child-days, when even he was a "mighty prophet," a "seer blest," one who had come into the world "trailing clouds of glory." Alas! he perceives that the mystic splendours have faded into the light of common day, if they have not even given place to the gloom of doubt, or the black night of sin. Then, taking himself as a microcosm, he ascribes a similar fate to the race.

Nothing is more inspiriting in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ than its complete reversal of this dismal process of reflection, and its promise of the Golden Age in the future. The most exalted Hebrew prophecy anticipated something of the kind; here and there it lit up its sombre pages with the hope of a brilliant future. The attitude of the Jews in the present instance, when they simply set a question on one side, waiting till a priest with Urim and Thummim should appear, suggests too faint a belief in the future to be prophetic. But like Socrates' hint at the possibility of one arising who should solve the problems which were inscrutable to the Athenians of his day, it points to a sense of need. When at length Christ came as "the Light of the World," it was to supply a widely felt want. It is true He brought no Urim and Thummim. The supreme motive for thankfulness in this connection is that His revelation is so much more ample than the wizard guidance men had formerly clung to, as to be like the broad sunshine in comparison with the shifting lights of magic gems. Though He gave no formal answers to petty questions such as those for which the Jews would resort to a priest, as their heathen neighbours

resorted to a soothsayer, He shed a wholesome radiance on the path of life, so that His followers have come to regard the providing of a priest with Urim and Thummim as at best an expedient adapted to the requirements of an age of superstition.

If the caravan lacked the privilege of an oracle, care was taken to equip it as well as the available means would allow. These were not abundant. There were servants, it is true. There were beasts of burden too—camels, horses, asses; but these were few in comparison to the numbers of the host—only at the rate of one animal to a family of four persons. Yet the expedition set out in a semi-royal character, for it was protected by a guard of a thousand horsemen sent by Cyrus. Better than this, it possessed a spirit of enthusiasm which triumphed over poverty and hardship, and spread a great gladness through the people. Now at length it was possible to take down the harps from the willows. Besides the temple choristers, two hundred singing men and women accompanied the pilgrims to help to give expression to the exuberant joyousness of the host. The spirit of the whole company was expressed in a noble lyric that has become familiar to us :—

"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,
We were like unto them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongue with singing :
Then said they among the nations,
The Lord hath done great things for them.
The Lord hath done great things for us ;
Whereof we are glad." *

* Psalm cxxvi. 1-3.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEW TEMPLE.

Ezra ii. 68—iii.

UNLIKE the historian of the exodus from Egypt, our chronicler gives no account of adventures of the pilgrims on the road to Palestine, although much of their way led them through a wild and difficult country. So huge a caravan as that which accompanied Zerubbabel must have taken several months to cover the eight hundred miles between Babylon and Jerusalem;* for even Ezra with his smaller company spent four months on their journey.† A dreary desert stretched over the vast space between the land of exile and the old home of the Jews among the mountains of the West; and here the commissariat would tax the resources of the ablest organisers. It is possible that the difficulties of the desert were circumvented in the most prosaic manner—by simply avoiding this barren, waterless region, and taking a long sweep round by the north of Syria. Passing over the pilgrimage, which afforded him no topics of interest, without a word of comment, the chronicler plants us at once

* *I.e.*, if the route was the usual one, by Tadmor (Palmyra). The easier but roundabout way by Aleppo would have occupied a still longer time.

† Ezra vii. 8, 9.

in the midst of the busy scenes at Jerusalem, where we see the returned exiles, at length arrived at the end of their tedious journey, preparing to accomplish the one purpose of their expedition.

The first step was to provide the means for building the temple, and contributions were made for this object by all classes of the community—as we gather from the more complete account in Nehemiah *— from the prince and the aristocracy to the general public, for it was to be a united work. And yet it is implied by the narrative that many had no share in it. These people may have been poor originally or impoverished by their journey, and not at all deficient in generosity or lacking in faith. Still we often meet with those who have enough enthusiasm to applaud a good work and yet not enough to make any sacrifice in promoting it. It is expressly stated that the gifts were offered freely. No tax was imposed by the authorities; but there was no backwardness on the part of the actual donors, who were impelled by a glowing devotion to open their purses without stint. Lastly, those who contributed did so "after their ability." This is the true "proportionate giving." For all to give an equal sum is impossible unless the poll-tax is to be fixed at a miserable minimum. Even for all to give the same proportion is unjust. There are poor men who ought not to sacrifice a tenth of what they receive; there are rich men who will be guilty of unfaithfulness to their stewardship if they do not devote far more than this fraction of their vast revenues to the service of God and their fellow-men. It would be reasonable for some of the latter only to reserve the tithe for their own use and to give away nine-tenths

* Neh. vii. 70-72.

of their income, for even then they would not be giving "after their ability."

After the preliminary step of collecting the contributions, the pilgrims proceed to the actual work they have in hand. In this they are heartily united; they gather themselves together "as one man" in a great assembly, which, if we may trust the account in Esdras, is held in an open space by the first gate towards the east,* and therefore close to the site of the old temple, almost among its very ruins. The unity of spirit and the harmony of action which characterise the commencement of the work are good auguries of its success. This is to be a popular undertaking. Sanctioned by Cyrus, promoted by the aristocracy, it is to be carried out with the full co-operation of the multitude. The first temple had been the work of a king; the second is to be the work of a people. The nation had been dazzled by the splendour of Solomon's court, and had basked in its rays so that the after-glow of them lingered in the memories of ages even down to the time of our Lord.† But there was a healthier spirit in the humbler work of the returned exiles, when, forced to dispense with the king they would gladly have accepted, they undertook the task of building the new temple themselves.

In the centre of the mosque known as the "Dome of the Rock" there is a crag with the well-worn remains of steps leading up to the top of it, and with channels cut in its surface. This has been identified by recent explorers as the site of the great Altar of Burnt-offerings. It is on the very crest of Mount Moriah. Formerly it was thought that it was the site of the inmost shrine of the temple, known as "The Holy

* 1 Esdras v. 47. † Matt. vi. 29.

of Holies," but the new view, which seems to be fairly established, gives an unexpected prominence to the altar. This rude square structure of unhewn stone was the most elevated and conspicuous object in the temple. The altar was to Judaism what the cross is to Christianity. Both for us and for the Jews what is most vital and precious in religion is the dark mystery of a sacrifice. The first work of the temple builders was to set up the altar again on its old foundation. Before a stone of the temple was laid, the smoke of sacrificial fires might be seen ascending to heaven from the highest crag of Moriah. For fifty years all sacrifices had ceased. Now with haste, in fear of hindrance from jealous neighbours, means were provided to re-establish them before any attempt was made to rebuild the temple. It is not quite easy to see what the writer means when, after saying "And they set the altar upon his bases," he adds, "for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries." The suggestion that the phrase may be varied so as to mean that the awe which this religious work inspired in the heathen neighbours prevented them from molesting it is far-fetched and improbable. Nor is it likely that the writer intends to convey the idea that the Jews hastened the building of the altar as a sort of Palladium, trusting that its sacrifices would protect them in case of invasion, for this is to attribute too low and materialistic a character to their religion. More reasonable is the explanation that they hastened the work because they feared that their neighbours might either hinder it or wish to have a share in it—an equally objectionable thing, as subsequent events showed.

The chronicler distinctly states that the sacrifices which were now offered, as well as the festivals which

were established later, were all designed to meet the requirements of the law of Moses—that everything might be done "as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God." This statement does not throw much light on the history of the Pentateuch. We know that that work was not yet in the hands of the Jews at Jerusalem, because this was nearly eighty years before Ezra introduced it. The sentence suggests that according to the chronicler *some* law bearing the name of Moses was known to the first body of returned exiles. We need not regard that suggestion as a reflection from later years. Deuteronomy may have been the law referred to; or it may have been some rubric of traditional usages in the possession of the priests.

Meanwhile two facts of importance come out here—*first*, that the method of worship adopted by the returned exiles was a revival of ancient customs, a return to the old ways, not an innovation of their own, and *second*, that this restoration was in careful obedience to the known will of God. Here we have the root idea of the Torah. It announces that God has revealed His will, and it implies that the service of God can only be acceptable when it is in harmony with the will of God. The prophets taught that obedience was better than sacrifice. The priests held that sacrifice itself was a part of obedience. With both the primary requisite was obedience—as it is the primary requisite in all religion.

The particular kind of sacrifice offered on the great altar was the burnt-offering. Now we do occasionally meet with expiatory ideas in connection with this sacrifice; but unquestionably the principal conception attached to the burnt-offering, in distinction from the sin-offering, was the idea of self-dedication on the part of the worshipper. Thus the Jews re-consecrated

themselves to God by the solemn ceremony of sacrifice, and they kept up the thought of renewed consecration by the regular repetition of the burnt-offering. It is difficult for us to enter into the feelings of the people who practised so antique a cult, even to them archaic in its ceremonies, and dimly suggestive of primitive rites that had their origin in far-off barbaric times. But one thing is clear, shining as with letters of awful fire against the black clouds of smoke that hang over the altar. This sacrifice was always a "whole offering." As it was being completely consumed in the flames before their very eyes, the worshippers would see a vivid representation of the tremendous truth that the most perfect sacrifice is death—nay, that it is even more than death, that it is absolute self-effacement in total and unreserved surrender to God.

Various rites follow the great central sacrifice of the burnt-offering, ushered in by the most joyous festival of the year, the Feast of Tabernacles, when the people scatter themselves over the hills round Jerusalem under the shade of extemporised bowers made out of the leafy boughs of trees, and celebrate the goodness of God in the final and richest harvest, the vintage. Then come New Moon and the other festivals that stud the calendar with sacred dates and make the Jewish year a round of glad festivities.

Thus, we see, the full establishment of religious services precedes the building of the temple. A weighty truth is enshrined in this apparently incongruous fact. The worship itself is felt to be more important than the house in which it is to be celebrated. That truth should be even more apparent to us who have read the great words of Jesus uttered by Jacob's well, "The hour cometh when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem,

shall ye worship the Father, . . . when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth." * How vain then is it to treat the erection of churches as though it were the promotion of a revival of religion! As surely as the empty sea-shell tossed up on the beach can never secrete a living organism to inhabit it, a mere building—whether it be the most gorgeous cathedral or the plainest village meeting-house—will never induce a living spirit of worship to dwell in its cold desolation. Every true religious revival begins in the spiritual sphere and finds its place of worship where it may—in the rustic barn or on the hill-side—if no more seemly home can be provided for it, because its real temple is the humble and contrite heart.

Still the design of building the temple at Jerusalem was kept constantly in view by the pilgrims. Accordingly it was necessary to purchase materials, and in particular the fragrant cedar wood from the distant forests of Lebanon. These famous forests were still in the possession of the Phœnicians, for Cyrus had allowed a local autonomy to the busy trading people on the northern sea-board. So in spite of the king's favour it was requisite for the Jews to pay the full price for the costly timber. Now, in disbursing the original funds brought up from Babylon, it would seem that the whole of this money was expended in labour, in paying the wages of masons and carpenters. Therefore the Jews had to export agricultural products—such as corn, wine, and olive oil—in exchange for the imports of timber they received from the Phœnicians. The question at once arises, how did they come to be possessed of these fruits of the soil? The answer is

* John iv. 21, 23.

supplied by a chronological remark in our narrative. It was in the second year of their residence in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood that the Jews commenced the actual building of their temple. They had first patiently cleared, ploughed, and sown the neglected fields, trimmed and trained the vines, and tended the olive gardens, so that they were able to reap a harvest, and to give the surplus products for the purchase of the timber required in building the temple. As the foundation was laid in the spring, the order for the cedar wood must have been sent before the harvest was reaped—pledging it in advance with faith in the God who gives the increase. The Phœnician woodmen fell their trees in the distant forests of Lebanon; and the massive trunks are dragged down to the coast, and floated along the Mediterranean to Joppa, and then carried on the backs of camels or slowly drawn up the heights of Judah in ox-waggons, while the crops that are to pay for them are still green in the fields.

Here then is a further proof of devotion on the part of the Jews from Babylon—though it is scarcely hinted at in the narrative, though we can only discover it by a careful comparison of facts and dates. Labour is expended on the fields; long weary months of waiting are endured; when the fruits of toil are obtained, these hard-earned stores are not hoarded by their owners: they too, like the gold and silver of the wealthier Jews, are gladly surrendered for the one object which kindles the enthusiasm of every class of the community.

At length all is ready. Jeshua the priest now precedes Zerubbabel, as well as the rest of the twelve leaders, in inaugurating the great work. On the Levites is laid the immediate responsibility of carrying it through. When the foundation is laid, the priests

in their new white vestments sound their silver trumpets, and the choir of Levites, the sons of Asaph, clang their brazen cymbals. To the accompaniment of this inspiriting music they sing glad psalms in praise of God, giving thanks to Him, celebrating His goodness and His mercy that endureth for ever toward Israel. This is not at all like the soft music and calm chanting of subdued cathedral services that we think of in connection with great national festivals. The instruments blare and clash, the choristers cry aloud, and the people join them with a mighty shout. When shrill discordant notes of bitter wailing, piped by a group of melancholy old men, threaten to break the harmony of the scene, they are drowned in the deluge of jubilation that rises up in protest and beats down all their opposition with its triumph of gladness. To a sober Western the scene would seem to be a sort of religious orgy, like a wild Bacchanalian festival, like the howling of hosts of dervishes. But although it is the Englishman's habit to take his religion sombrely, if not sadly, it may be well for him to pause before pronouncing a condemnation of those men and women who are more exuberant in the expression of spiritual emotion. If he finds, even among his fellow-countrymen, some who permit themselves a more lively music and a more free method of public worship than he is accustomed to, is it not a mark of insular narrowness for him to visit these unconventional people with disapprobation? In abandoning the severe manners of their race, they are only approaching nearer to the time-old methods of ancient Israel.

In this clangour and clamour at Jerusalem the predominant note was a burst of irrepressible gladness. When God turned the captivity of Israel, mourning was

transformed into laughter. To understand the wild excitement of the Jews, their pæan of joy, their very ecstasy, we must recollect what they had passed through, as well as what they were now anticipating. We must remember the cruel disaster of the overthrow of Jerusalem, the desolation of the exile, the sickness of weary waiting for deliverance, the harshness of the persecution that embittered the later years of the captivity under Nabonidas; we must think of the toilsome pilgrimage through the desert, with its dismal wastes, its dangers and its terrors, followed by the patient work on the land and gathering in of means for building the temple. And now all this was over. The bow had been terribly bent; the rebound was immense. People who cannot feel strong religious gladness have never known the heartache of deep religious grief. These Israelites had cried out of the depths; they were prepared to shout for joy from the heights. Perhaps we may go further, and detect a finer note in this great blast of jubilation, a note of higher and more solemn gladness. The chastisement of the exile was past, and the long-suffering mercy of God—enduring for ever—was again smiling out on the chastened people. And yet the positive realisation of their hopes was for the future. The joy, therefore, was inspired by faith. With little accomplished as yet, the sanguine people already saw the temple in their mind's eye, with its massive walls, its cedar chambers, and its adornment of gold and richly dyed hangings. In the very laying of the foundation their eager imaginations leaped forward to the crowning of the highest pinnacles. Perhaps they saw more; perhaps they perceived, though but dimly, something of the meaning of the spiritual blessedness that had been foretold by their prophets.

All this gladness centred in the building of a temple, and therefore ultimately in the worship of God. We take but a one-sided view of Judaism if we judge it by the sour ideas of later Pharisaism. As it presented itself to St. Paul in opposition to the gospel, it was stern and loveless. But in its earlier days this religion was free and gladsome, though, as we shall soon see, even then a rigour of fanaticism soon crept in and turned its joy into grief. Here, however, at the founding of the temple, it wears its sunniest aspect. There is no reason why religion should wear any other aspect to the devout soul. It should be happy; for is it not the worship of a happy God?

Nevertheless, in the midst of the almost universal acclaim of joy and praise, there was the note of sadness wailed by the old men, who could recollect the venerable fane in which their fathers had worshipped before the ruthless soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar had reduced it to a heap of ashes. Possibly some of them had stood on this very spot half a century before, in an agony of despair, while they saw the cruel flames licking the ancient stones and blazing up among the cedar beams, and all the fine gold dimmed with black clouds of smoke. Was it likely that the feeble flock just returned from Babylon could ever produce such a wonder of the world as Solomon's temple had been? The enthusiastic younger people might be glad in their ignorance; but their sober elders, who knew more, could only weep. We cannot but think that, after the too common habit of the aged, these mournful old men viewed the past in a glamour of memory, magnifying its splendours as they looked back on them through the mists of time. If so, they were old indeed; for this habit, and not years, makes real old age. He is aged who lives in

bygone days, with his face ever set to the irreparable past, vainly regretting its retreating memories, uninterested in the present, despondent of the future. The true elixir of life, the secret of perpetual youth of soul, is interest in the present and the future, with the forward glance of faith and hope. Old men who cultivate this spirit have young hearts though the snow is on their heads. And such are wise. No doubt, from the standpoint of a narrow common sense, with its shrunken views confined to the material and the mundane, the old men who wept had more reason for their conduct than the inexperienced younger men who rejoiced. But there is a prudence that comes of blindness, and there is an imprudence that is sublime in its daring, because it springs from faith. The despair of old age makes one great mistake, because it ignores one great truth. In noting that many good things have passed away, it forgets to remember that God remains. God is not dead! Therefore the future is safe. In the end the young enthusiasts of Jerusalem were justified. A prophet arose who declared that a glory which the former temple had never known should adorn the new temple, in spite of its humble beginning; and history verified his word when the Lord took possession of His house in the person of His Son.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LIMITS OF COMPREHENSION.

Ezra iv. 1-5, 24.

THE fourth chapter of the Book of Ezra introduces the vexed question of the limits of comprehension in religion by affording a concrete illustration of it in a very acute form. Communities, like individual organisms, can only live by means of a certain adjustment to their environment, in the settlement of which there necessarily arises a serious struggle to determine what shall be absorbed and what rejected, how far it is desirable to admit alien bodies and to what extent it is necessary to exclude them. The difficulty thus occasioned appeared in the company of returned exiles soon after they had begun to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. It was the seed of many troubles. The anxieties and disappointments which overshadowed the subsequent history nearly all of them sprang from this one source. Here we are brought to a very distinguishing characteristic of the Persian period. The idea of Jewish exclusiveness which has been so singular a feature in the whole course of Judaism right down to our own day was now in its birth-throes. Like a young Hercules, it had to fight for its life in its very cradle. It first appeared in the anxious compilation of genealogical registers and the careful sifting

of the qualifications of the pilgrims before they left Babylon. In the events which followed the settlement at Jerusalem it came forward with determined insistence on its rights, in opposition to a very tempting offer which would have been fatal to its very existence.

The chronicler introduces the neighbouring people under the title "The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin"; but in doing so he is describing them according to their later actions; when they first appear on his pages their attitude is friendly, and there is no reason to suspect any hypocrisy in it. We cannot take them to be the remainder of the Israelite inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom who had been permitted to stay in their land when their brethren had been violently expelled by the Assyrians, and who were now either showing their old enmity to Judah and Benjamin by trying to pick a new quarrel, or, on the other hand, manifesting a better spirit and seeking reconciliation. No doubt such people existed, especially in the north, where they became, in part at least, the ancestors of the Galileans of New Testament times. But the men now referred to distinctly assert that they were brought up to Palestine by the Assyrian king Esar-haddon. Neither can they be the descendants of the Israelite priests who were sent at the request of the colonists to teach them the religion of the land when they were alarmed at an incursion of lions;* for only one priest is directly mentioned in the history, and though he may have had companions and assistants, the small college of missionaries could not be called "the people of the land" (ver. 4). These people must be the foreign colonists. There were Chaldæans from Babylon and

* 2 Kings xvii. 25-28.

the neighbouring cities of Cutha and Sepharvaim (the modern *Mosaib*), Elamites from Susa, Phœnicians from Sidon—if we may trust Josephus here*—and Arabs from Petra. These had been introduced on four successive occasions—first, as the Assyrian inscriptions show, by Sargon, who sent two sets of colonists; then by Esar-haddon; and, lastly, by Ashur-banipal.† The various nationalities had had time to become well amalgamated together, for the first colonisation had happened a hundred and eighty years, and the latest colonisation a hundred and thirty years, before the Jews returned from Babylon. As the successive exportations of Israelites went on side by side with the successive importations of foreigners, the two classes must have lived together for some time; and even after the last captivity of the Israelites had been effected, those who were still left in the land would have come into contact with the colonists. Thus, apart from the special mission of the priest whose business it was to introduce the rites of sacrificial worship, the popular religion of the Israelites would have become known to the mixed heathen people who were settled among them.

These neighbours assert that they worship the God whom the Jews at Jerusalem worship, and that they have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esar-haddon, the Assyrian king to whom, in particular, they attribute their being brought up to Palestine, possibly because the ancestors of the deputation to Jerusalem were among the colonists planted by that king. For a century and a half they have acknowledged the God of the Jews. They therefore request to be permitted to assist in rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem. At the

* *Ant.*, XII. v. 5. † The "Osnappar" of Ezra iv. 10.

first blush of it their petition looks reasonable and even generous. The Jews were poor; a great work lay before them; and the inadequacy of their means in view of what they aimed at had plunged the less enthusiastic among them into grief and despair. Here was an offer of assistance that might prove most efficacious. The idea of centralisation in worship of which Josiah had made so much would be furthered by this means, because instead of following the example of the Israelites before the exile who had their altar at Bethel, the colonists proposed to take part in the erection of the one Jewish temple at Jerusalem. If their previous habit of offering sacrifices in their own territory was offensive to rigorous Jews, although they might speak of it quite naively, because they were unconscious that there was anything objectionable in it and even regard it as meritorious, the very way to abolish this ancient custom was to give the colonists an interest in the central shrine. If their religion was defective, how could it be improved better than by bringing them into contact with the law-abiding Jews? While the offer of the colonists promised aid to the Jews in building the temple, it also afforded them a grand missionary opportunity for carrying out the broad programme of the Second Isaiah, who had promised the spread of the light of God's grace among the Gentiles.

In view of these considerations we cannot but read the account of the absolute rejection of the offer by Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the twelve leaders with a sense of painful disappointment. The less pleasing side of religious intensity here presents itself. Zeal seems to be passing into fanaticism. A selfish element mars the picture of whole-hearted devotion which was so delightfully portrayed in the history of

the returned exiles up to this time. The leaders are cautious enough to couch their answer in terms that seem to hint at their inability to comply with the friendly request of their neighbours, however much they may wish to do so, because of the limitation imposed upon them in the edict of Cyrus which confined the command to build the temple at Jerusalem to the Jews. But it is evident that the secret of the refusal is in the mind and will of the Jews themselves. They absolutely decline any co-operation with the colonists. There is a sting in the carefully chosen language with which they define their work: they call it building a house "unto *our* God." Thus they not only accept the polite phrase "Your God" employed by the colonists in addressing them; but by markedly accentuating its limitation they disallow any right of the colonists to claim the same divinity.

Such a curt refusal of friendly overtures was naturally most offensive to the people who received it. But their subsequent conduct was so bitterly ill-natured that we are driven to think they must have had some selfish aims from the first. They at once set some paid agents to work at court to poison the mind of the government with calumnies about the Jews. It is scarcely likely that they were able to win Cyrus over to their side against his favourite *protégés*. The king may have been too absorbed with the great affairs of his vast dominions for any murmur of this business to reach him while it was being disposed of by some official. But perhaps the matter did not come up till after Cyrus had handed over the government to his son Cambyses, which he did in the year B.C. 532—three years before his death. At all events the calumnies were successful. The work of the temple building was arrested at its very commencement

—for as yet little more had been done beyond collecting materials. The Jews were paying dearly for their exclusiveness.

All this looks very miserable. But let us examine the situation.

We should show a total lack of the historical spirit if we were to judge the conduct of Zerubbabel and his companions by the broad principles of Christian liberalism. We must take into account their religious training and the measure of light to which they had attained. We must also consider the singularly difficult position in which they were placed. They were not a nation; they were a Church. Their very existence, therefore, depended upon a certain ecclesiastical organisation. They must have shaped themselves according to some definite lines, or they would have melted away into the mass of mixed nationalities and debased eclectic religions with which they were surrounded. Whether the course of personal exclusiveness which they chose was wisest and best may be fairly questioned. It has been the course followed by their children all through the centuries, and it has acquired this much of justification—it has succeeded. Judaism has been preserved by Jewish exclusiveness. We may think that the essential truths of Judaism might have been maintained by other means which would have allowed of a more gracious treatment of outsiders. Meanwhile, however, we must see that Zerubbabel and his companions were not simply indulging in churlish unsociability when they rejected the request of their neighbours. Rightly or wrongly, they took this disagreeable course with a great purpose in mind.

Then we must understand what the request of the colonists really involved. It is true they only asked

to be allowed to assist in *building* the temple. But it would have been impossible to stay here. If they had taken an active share in the labour and sacrifice of the construction of the temple, they could not have been excluded afterwards from taking part in the temple worship. This is the more clear since the very grounds of their request were that they worshipped and sacrificed to the God of the Jews. Now a great prophet had predicted that God's house was to be a home of prayer for all nations.* But the Jews at Jerusalem belonged to a very different school of thought. With them, as we have learnt from the genealogies, the racial idea was predominant. Judaism was for the Jews.

But let us understand what that religion was which the colonists asserted to be identical with the religion of the returned exiles. They said they worshipped the God of the Jews, but it was after the manner of the people of the Northern Kingdom. In the days of the Israelites that worship had been associated with the steer at Bethel, and the people of Jerusalem had condemned the degenerate religion of their northern brethren as sinful in the sight of God. But the colonists had not confined themselves to this. They had combined their old idolatrous religion with that of the newly adopted indigenous divinity of Palestine. "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods."† Between them, they adored a host of Pagan divinities, whose barbarous names are grimly noted by the Hebrew historian—Succoth-benoth, Nergal, Ashima, etc.‡ There is no evidence to show that this heathenism had become

* Isa. lvi. 7. † 2 Kings xvii. 33.
‡ 2 Kings xvii. 30, 31.

extinct by the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. At all events, the bastard product of such a worship as that of the Bethel steer and the Babylonian and Phœnician divinities, even when purged of its most gross corruption, was not likely to be after the mind of the puritan pilgrims. The colonists did not offer to adopt the traditional Torah, which the returned exiles were sedulously observing.

Still it may be said, if the people were imperfect in knowledge and corrupt in practice, might not the Jews have enlightened and helped them? We are reminded of the reproach that Bede brings so sternly against the ancient British Christians when he blames them for not having taught the gospel to the Saxon heathen who had invaded their land. How far it would have been possible for a feeble people to evangelise their more powerful neighbours, in either case, it is impossible to say.

It cannot be denied, however, that in their refusal the Jews gave prominence to racial and not to religious distinctions. Yet even in this matter it would be unreasonable for us to expect them to have surpassed the early Christian Church at Jerusalem and to have anticipated the daring liberalism of St. Paul. The followers of St. James were reluctant to receive any converts into their communion except on condition of circumcision. This meant that Gentiles must become Jews before they could be recognised as Christians. Now there was no sign that the mixed race of colonists ever contemplated becoming Jews by humbling themselves to a rite of initiation. Even if most of them were already circumcised, as far as we know none of them gave an indication of willingness to subject themselves wholly to Jewish ordinances. To receive them, there-

fore, would be contrary to the root principle of Judaism. It is not fair to mete out a harsh condemnation to Jews who declined to do what was only allowed among Christians after a desperate struggle, which separated the leader of the liberal party from many of his brethren and left him for a long while under a cloud of suspicion.

Great confusion has been imported into the controversy on Church comprehension by not keeping it separate from the question of tolerance in religion. The two are distinct in many respects. Comprehension is an ecclesiastical matter; tolerance is primarily concerned with the policy of the state. Whilst it is admitted that nobody should be coerced in his religion by the state, it is not therefore to be assumed that everybody is to be received into the Church.

Nevertheless we feel that there is a real and vital connection between the ideas of toleration and Church comprehensiveness. A Church may become culpably intolerant, although she may not use the power of the state for the execution of her mandates; she may contrive many painful forms of persecution, without resorting to the rack and the thumb-screw. The question therefore arises, What are the limits to tolerance within a Church? The attempt to fix these limits by creeds and canons has not been wholly successful, either in excluding the unworthy or in including the most desirable members. The drift of thought in the present day being towards wider comprehensiveness, it becomes increasingly desirable to determine on what principles this may be attained. Good men are weary of the little garden walled around, and they doubt whether it is altogether the Lord's peculiar ground; they have discovered that many of the flowers of the field are fair

and fragrant, and they have a keen suspicion that not a few weeds may be lurking even in the trim parterre; so they look over the wall and long for breadth and brotherhood, in a larger recognition of all that is good in the world. Now the dull religious lethargy of the eighteenth century is a warning against the chief danger that threatens those who yield themselves to this fascinating impulse. Latitudinarianism sought to widen the fold that had been narrowed on one side by sacerdotal pretensions and on the other side by puritan rigour. The result was that the fold almost disappeared. Then religion was nearly swallowed up in the swamps of indifference. This deplorable issue of a well-meant attempt to serve the cause of charity suggests that there is little good in breaking down the barriers of exclusiveness unless we have first established a potent centre of unity. If we have put an end to division simply by destroying the interests which once divided men, we have only attained the communion of death. In the graveyard friend and foe lie peaceably side by side, but only because both are dead. Wherever there is life two opposite influences are invariably at work. There is a force of attraction drawing in all that is congenial, and there is a force of a contrary character repelling everything that is uncongenial. Any attempt to tamper with either of these forces must result in disaster. A social or an ecclesiastical division that arbitrarily crosses the lines of natural affinity creates a schism in the body, and leads to a painful mutilation of fellowship. On the other hand, a forced comprehension of alien elements produces internal friction, which often leads to an explosion, shattering the whole fabric. But the common mistake has been in attending to the circumference and neglect-

ing the centre, in beating the bounds of the parish instead of fortifying the citadel. The liberalism of St. Paul was not latitudinarian, because it was inspired by a vital principle which served as the centre of all his teaching. He preached liberty and comprehensiveness, because he had first preached Christ. In Christ he found at once a bond of union and an escape from narrowness. The middle wall of partition was broken down, not by a Vandal armed with nothing better than the besom of destruction, but by the Founder of a new kingdom, who could dispense with artificial restrictions because He could draw all men unto Himself.

Unfortunately the returned captives at Jerusalem did not feel conscious of any such spiritual centre of unity. They might have found it in their grandly simple creed, in their faith in God. But their absorption in sacrificial ritual and its adjuncts shows that they were too much under the influence of religious externalism. This being the case, they could only preserve the purity of their communion by carefully guarding its gates. It is pitiable to see that they could find no better means of doing this than the harsh test of racial integrity. Their action in this matter fostered a pride of birth which was as injurious to their own better lives as it was to the extension of their religion in the world. But so long as they were incapable of a larger method, if they had accepted counsels of liberalism they would have lost themselves and their mission. Looking at the positive side of their mission, we see how the Jews were called to bear witness to the great principle of separateness. This principle is as essential to Christianity as it was to Judaism. The only difference is that with the more spiritual faith it takes a more spiritual form. The

people of God must ever be consecrated to God, and therefore separate from sin, separate from the world—separate unto God.

NOTE.—For the section iv. 6-23 see Chapter XIV. This section is marked by a change of language; the writer adopts Aramaic at iv. 8, and he continues in that language down to vi. 18. The decree of Artaxerxes in vii. 12-26 is also in Aramaic.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MISSION OF PROPHECY.

EZRA v. 1, 2.

THE work of building the temple at Jerusalem, which had been but nominally commenced in the reign of Cyrus, when it was suddenly arrested before the death of that king, and which had not been touched throughout the reigns of the two succeeding kings, Cambyses and Pseudo-Bardes, was taken up in earnest in the second year of Darius, the son of Hystaspes (B.C. 521). The disorders of the empire were then favourable to local liberty. Cambyses committed suicide during a revolt of his army on the march to meet the Pretender who had assumed the name of his murdered brother, Bardes. Seven months later the usurper was assassinated in his palace by some of the Persian nobles. Darius, who was one of the conspirators, ascended the throne in the midst of confusion and while the empire seemed to be falling to pieces. Elam, the old home of the house of Cyrus, revolted; Syria revolted; Babylon revolted twice, and was twice taken by siege. For a time the king's writ could not run in Palestine. But it was not on account of these political changes that the Jews returned to their work. The relaxing of the supreme authority had left them more than ever at the mercy of their

unfriendly neighbours. The generous disposition of Darius might have led them to regard him as a second Cyrus, and his religion might have encouraged them to hope that he would be favourable to them, for Darius was a monotheist, a worshipper of Ormazd. But they recommenced their work without making any appeal to the Great King and without receiving any permission from him, and they did this when he was far too busy fighting for his throne to attend to the troubles of a small, distant city.

We must look in another direction for the impetus which started the Jews again upon their work. Here we come upon one of the most striking facts in the history of Israel, nay, one of the greatest phenomena in the spiritual experience of mankind. The voice of prophecy was heard among the ruins of Jerusalem. The Cassandra-like notes of Jeremiah had died away more than half a century before. Then Ezekiel had seen his fantastic visions, "a captive by the river of Chebar," and the Second Isaiah had sounded his trumpet-blast in the East summoning the exiles to a great hope; but as yet no prophet had appeared among the pilgrims on their return to Jerusalem. We cannot account for the sudden outburst of prophecy. It is a work of the Spirit that breathes like the wind, coming we know not how. We can hear its sound; we can perceive the fact. But we cannot trace its origin, or determine its issues. It is born in mystery and it passes into mystery. If it is true that "*poeta nascitur, non fit*," much more must we affirm that the prophet is no creature of human culture. He may be cultivated, after God has made him; he cannot be manufactured by any human machinery. No "School of the Prophets" ever made a true prophet. Many of the

prophets never came near any such institution; some of them distinctly repudiated the professional "order." The lower prophets with which the Northern Kingdom once swarmed were just dervishes who sang and danced and worked themselves into a frenzy before the altars on the high places; these men were quite different from the truly inspired messengers of God. Their craft could be taught, and their sacred colleges recruited to any extent from the ranks of fanaticism. But the rare, austere souls that spoke with the authority of the Most High came in a totally different manner. When there was no prophet and when visions were rare men could only wait for God to send the hoped-for guide; they could not call him into existence. The appearance of an inspired soul is always one of the marvels of history. Great men of the second rank may be the creatures of their age. But it is given to the few of the very first order to be independent of their age, to confront it and oppose it if need be, perhaps to turn its current and shape its course.

The two prophets who now proclaimed their message in Jerusalem appeared at a time of deep depression. They were not borne on the crest of a wave of a religious revival, as its spokesmen to give it utterance. Pagan orators and artists flourished in an Augustan age. The Hebrew prophets came when the circumstances of society were least favourable. Like painters arising to adorn a dingy city, like poets singing of summer in the winter of discontent, like flowers in the wilderness, like wells in the desert, they brought life and strength and gladness to the helpless and despondent, because they came from God. The literary form of their work reflected the civilisation of their day, but there was on it a light that never shone on sea or shore, and this they

knew to be the light of God. We never find a true religious revival springing from the spirit of the age. Such a revival always begins in one or two choice souls —in a Moses, a Samuel, a John the Baptist, a St. Bernard, a Jonathan-Edwards, a Wesley, a Newman. Therefore it is vain for weary watchers to scan the horizon for signs of the times in the hope that some general improvement of society or some widespread awakening of the Church will usher in a better future. This is no reason for discouragement, however. It rather warns us not to despise the day of small things. When once the spring of living water breaks out, though it flows at first in a little brook, there is hope that it may swell into a great river.

The situation is the more remarkable since the first of the two prophets was an old man, who even seems to have known the first temple before its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar.* Haggai is called simply "the prophet," perhaps because his father's name was not known, but more likely because he himself had attained so much eminence that the title was given to him *par excellence*. Still this may only apply to the descriptions of him in the age of the chronicler. There is no indication that he prophesied in his earlier days. He was probably one of the captives who had been carried away to Babylon in his childhood, and who had returned with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem. Yet all this time and during the first years of his return, as far as we know, he was silent. At length, in extreme old age, he burst out into inspired utterance—one of Joel's old men who were to dream dreams,† like John the Evangelist, whose greatest work dates from his last

* Hag. i. 1, ii. 9. † Joel ii. 28.

years, and Milton, who wrote his great epic when affliction seemed to have ended his life-work. He must have been brooding over the bitter disappointment in which the enthusiasm of the returned captives had been quenched. It could not be God's will that they should be thus mocked and deceived in their best hopes. True faith is not a will-o'-the-wisp that lands its followers in a dreary swamp. The hope of Israel is no mirage. For God is faithful. Therefore the despair of the Jews must be wrong.

We have a few fragments of the utterances of Haggai preserved for us in the Old Testament Canon. They are so brief and bald and abrupt as to suggest the opinion that they are but notes of his discourses, mere outlines of what he really said. As they are preserved for us they certainly convey no idea of wealth of poetic imagination or richness of oratorical colouring. But Haggai may have possessed none of these qualities, and yet his words may have had a peculiar force of their own. He is a reflective man. The long meditation of years has taught him the value of thoughtfulness. The burden of his message is "Consider your ways." * In short, incisive utterances he arrests attention and urges consideration. But the outcome of all he has to say is to cheer the drooping spirits of his fellow-citizens, and urge on the rebuilding of the temple with confident promises of its great future. For the most part his inspiration is simple, but it is searching, and we perceive the triumphant hopefulness of the true prophet in the promise that the latter glory of the house of God shall be greater than the former.†

Haggai began to prophesy on the first day of the

* Hag. i. 5, 7. † Hag. ii. 9.

sixth month of the second year of Darius.* So effective were his words that Zerubbabel and his companions were at once roused from the lethargy of despair, and within three weeks the masons and carpenters were again at work on the temple.† Two months after Haggai had broken the long silence of prophecy in Jerusalem Zechariah appeared. He was of a very different stamp; he was one of the young men who see visions. Familiar with the imagery of Babylonian art, he wove its symbols into the pictures of his own exuberant fancy. Moreover, Zechariah was a priest. Thus, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he united the two rival tendencies which had confronted one another in marked antagonism during the earlier periods of the history of Israel. Henceforth the brief return of prophetism, its soft after-glow among the restored people, is in peaceable alliance with priestism. The last prophet, Malachi, even exhorts the Jews to pay the priests their dues of tithe. Zechariah, like Haggai, urges on the work of building the temple.

Thus the chronicler's brief note on the appearance of two prophets at Jerusalem, and the electrical effect of their message, is a striking illustration of the mission of prophecy. That mission has been strangely misapprehended by succeeding ages. Prophets have been treated as miraculous conjurers, whose principal business consisted in putting together elaborate puzzles, perfectly unintelligible to their contemporaries, which the curious of later times were to decipher by the light of events. The prophets themselves formed no such idle estimate of their work, nor did their contemporaries assign to them this quaint and useless rôle. Though

* Hag. i. 1.

† Hag. ii. 1 *seq.*

these men were not the creatures of their times, they lived for their times. Haggai and Zechariah, as the chronicler emphatically puts it, "prophesied to the Jews that were in Jerusalem, . . . *even unto them*." The object of their message was immediate and quite practical—to stir up the despondent people and urge them to build the temple—and it was successful in accomplishing that end. As prophets of God they necessarily touched on eternal truths. They were not mere opportunists; their strength lay in the grasp of fundamental principles. This is why their teaching still lives, and is of lasting use for the Church in all ages. But in order to understand that teaching we must first of all read it in its original historical setting, and discover its direct bearing on contemporary needs.

Now the question arises, In what way did these prophets of God help the temple-builders? The fragments of their utterances which we possess enable us to answer this question. Zerubbabel was a disappointing leader. Such a man was far below the expected Messiah, although high hopes may have been set upon him when he started at the head of the caravan of pilgrims from Babylon. Cyrus may have known him better, and with the instinct of a king in reading men may have entrusted the lead to the heir of the Jewish throne, because he saw there would be no possibility of a dangerous rebellion resulting from the act of confidence. Haggai's encouragement to Zerubbabel to "be strong" is in a tone that suggests some weakness on the part of the Jewish leader. Both the prophets thought that he and his people were too easily discouraged. It was a part of the prophetic insight to look below the surface and discover the real secret of failure. The Jews set down their failure to adverse

circumstances ; the prophets attributed it to the character and conduct of the people and their leaders. Weak men commonly excuse their inactivity by reciting their difficulties, when stronger men would only regard those difficulties as furnishing an occasion for extra exertion. That is a most superficial view of history which regards it as wholly determined by circumstances. No great nation ever arose on such a principle. The Greeks who perished at Thermopylæ within a few years of the times we are now considering are honoured by all the ages as heroes of patriotism just because they refused to bow to circumstances. Now the courage which patriots practised in pagan lands is urged upon the Jews by their prophets from higher considerations. They are to see that they are weak and cowardly when they sit in dumb despair, crushed by the weight of external opposition. They have made a mistake in putting their trust in princes.* They have relied too much on Zerubbabel and too little on God. The failure of the arm of flesh should send them back to the never-failing out-stretched arm of the Almighty.

Have we not met with the same mistaken discouragement and the same deceptive excuses for it in the work of the Church, in missionary enterprises, in personal lives ? Every door is shut against the servant of God but one, the door of prayer. Forgetting this, and losing sight of the key of faith that would unlock it, he sits, like Elijah by Kerith, the picture of abject wretchedness. His great enterprises are abandoned because he thinks the opposition to them is insuperable. He forgets that, though his own forces are small, he is the envoy of the King of kings, who will not suffer him to

* Psalm cxviii. 8, 9.

be worsted if only he appeals to Heaven for fresh supplies. A dead materialism lies like a leaden weight on the heart of the Church, and she has not faith enough to shake it off and claim her great inheritance in all the spiritual wealth of the Unseen. Many a man cries, like Jacob, "All these things are against me," not perceiving that, even if they are, no number of "things" should be permitted to check the course of one who looks above and beyond what is seen and therefore only temporal to the eternal resources of God.

This was the message of Zechariah to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the head stone with shoutings of Grace, grace unto it!"*

Here, then, is the secret of the sudden revival of activity on the part of the Jews after they had been sitting for years in dumb apathy, gazing hopelessly on the few stones that had been laid among the ruins of the old temple. It was not the returning favour of the court under Darius, it was not the fame of the house of David, it was not the priestly dignity of the family of Zadok that awakened the slumbering zeal of the Jews; the movement began in an unofficial source, and it passed to the people through unofficial channels. It commenced in the meditations of a calm thinker; it was furthered by the visions of a rapt seer. This is a clear indication of the fact that the world is ruled by mind and spirit, not merely by force and authority. Thought and imagination lie at the springs of action. In the heart of it history is moulded by ideas. "Big

* Zech. iv. 6, 7.

battalions," "the sinews of war," "blood and iron," are phrases that suggest only the most external and therefore the most superficial causes. Beneath them are the *ideas* that govern all they represent.

Further, the influence of the prophets shows that the ideas which have most vitality and vigour are moral and spiritual in character. All thoughts are influential in proportion as they take possession of the minds and hearts of men and women. There is power in conceptions of science, philosophy, politics, sociology. But the ideas that touch people to the quick, the ideas that stir the hidden depths of consciousness and rouse the slumbering energies of life, are those that make straight for the conscience. Thus the two prophets exposed the shame of indolence; they rallied their gloomy fellow-citizens by high appeals to the sense of right.

Again, this influence was immensely strengthened by its relation to God. The prophets were more than moralists. The meditations of Marcus Aurelius could not touch any people as the considerations of the calm Haggai touched the Jews, for the older prophet, as well as the more rousing Zechariah, found the spell of his message in its revelation of God. He made the Jews perceive that they were not deserted by Jehovah; and directly they felt that God was with them in their work the weak and timid citizens were able to quit them like men. The irresistible might of Cromwell's Ironsides at Marston Moor came from their unwavering faith in their battle-cry, "The Lord of Hosts is with us!" General Gordon's immeasurable courage is explained when we read his letters and diaries, and see how he regarded himself as simply an instrument through whom God wrought. Here, too, is the strong side of Calvinism.

Then this impression of the power and presence of God in their destinies was deepened in the Jews by the manifest Divine authority with which the prophets spake. They prophesied "in the name of the God of Israel"—the one God of the people of both kingdoms now united in their representatives. Their "Thus saith the Lord" was the powder that drove the shot of their message through the toughest hide of apathy. Except to a Platonist, ideas are impossible apart from the mind that thinks them. Now the Jews, as well as their prophets, felt that the great ideas of prophecy could not be the products of pure human thinking. The sublime character, the moral force, the superb hopefulness of these ideas proclaimed their Divine origin. As it is the mission of the prophet to speak for God, so it is the voice of God in His inspired messenger that awakes the dead and gives strength to the weak.

This ultimate source of prophecy accounts for its unique character of hopefulness, and that in turn makes it a powerful encouragement for the weak and depressed people to whom it is sent. Wordsworth tells us that we live by "admiration, love, and hope." If one of these three sources of vitality is lost, life itself shrinks and fades. The man whose hope has fled has no lustre in his eye, no accent in his voice, no elasticity in his tread; by his dull and listless attitude he declares that the life has gone out of him. But the ultimate end of prophecy is to lead up to a gospel, and the meaning of the word "gospel" is just that there is a message from God bringing hope to the despairing. By inspiring a new hope this message kindles a new life.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEW DIFFICULTIES MET IN A NEW SPIRIT.

Ezra v. 3—vi. 5.

IT is in keeping with the character of his story of the returned Jews throughout, that no sooner has the chronicler let a ray of sunshine fall on his page—in his brief notice of the inspiriting mission of the two prophets—than he is compelled to plunge his narrative again into gloom. But he shows that there was now a new spirit in the Jews, so that they were prepared to meet opposition in a more manly fashion. If their jealous neighbours had been able to paralyse their efforts for years, it was only to be expected that a revival of energy in Jerusalem should provoke an increase of antagonism abroad, and doubtless the Jews were prepared for this. Still it was not a little alarming to learn that the infection of the anti-Jewish temper had spread over a wide area. The original opposition had come from the Samaritans. But in this later time the Jews were questioned by the Satrap of the whole district east of the Euphrates —"the governor beyond the river," * as the chronicler styles him, describing his territory as it would be regarded officially from the standpoint of Babylon.

* Ezra v. 3.

His Aramaic name, Tattenai, shows that he was not a Persian, but a native Syrian, appointed to his own province, according to the Persian custom. This man and one Shethar-bozenai, whom we may assume to be his secretary, must have been approached by the colonists in such a way that their suspicions were roused. Their action was at first only just and reasonable. They asked the Jews to state on what authority they were rebuilding the temple with its massive walls. In the Hebrew Bible the answer of the Jews is so peculiar as to suggest a corruption of the text. It is in the first person plural—"Then said *we* unto them," etc.* In the Septuagint the third person is substituted—"Then said *they*," etc., and this rendering is followed in the Syriac and Arabic versions. It would require a very slight alteration in the Hebrew text. The Old Testament Revisers have retained the first person—setting the alternative reading in the margin. If we keep to the Hebrew text as it stands, we must conclude that we have here a fragment from some contemporary writer which the chronicler has transcribed literally. But then it seems confusing. Some have shaped the sentence into a direct statement, so that in reply to the inquiry for their authority the Jews give the names of the builders. How is this an answer? Possibly the name of Zerubbabel, who had been appointed governor of Jerusalem by Cyrus, could be quoted as an authority. And yet the weakness of his position was so evident that very little would be gained in this way, for it would be the right of the Satrap to inquire into the conduct of the local governor. If, however, we read the sentence in the third person,

* Ezra v. 4.

it will contain a further question from the Satrap and his secretary, inquiring for the names of the leaders in the work at Jerusalem. Such an inquiry threatened danger to the feeble Zerubbabel.

The seriousness of the situation is recognised by the grateful comment of the chronicler, who here remarks that "the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews."* It is the peculiarity of even the dryest records of Scripture that the writers are always ready to detect the presence of God in history. This justifies us in describing the Biblical narratives as "sacred history," in contrast to the so-called "secular history" of such authors as Herodotus and Livy. The narrow conception of the difference is to think that God was with the Jews, while He left the Greeks and Romans and the whole Gentile world to their fate without any recognition or interference on His part. Such a view is most dishonouring to God, who is thus regarded as no better than a tribal divinity, and not as the Lord of heaven and earth. It is directly contradicted by the Old Testament historians, for they repeatedly refer to the influence of God on great world monarchies. No doubt a claim to the Divine graciousness as the peculiar privilege of Israel is to be seen in the Old Testament. As far as this was perverted into a selfish desire to confine the blessings of God to the Jews, it was vigorously rebuked in the Book of Jonah. Still it is indisputable that those who truly sought God's grace, acknowledged His authority, and obeyed His will, must have enjoyed privileges which such of the heathen as St. Paul describes in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans could not share. Thus the chronicler

* Ezra v. 5.

writes as though the leaders of the Jews in their difficulties were the special objects of the Divine notice. The eye of God was on *them*, distinctively. God is spoken of as *their* God. They were men who knew, trusted, and honoured God, and at the present moment they were loyally carrying out the direction of God's prophets. All this is special. Nevertheless, it remains true that the chief characteristic of Biblical history is its recognition of the presence of God in the affairs of mankind generally, and this applies to all nations, although it is most marked among those nations in which God is known and obeyed.

The peculiar form of Providence which is brought before us in the present instance is the Divine observation. It is difficult to believe that, just as the earth is visible to the stars throughout the day while the stars are invisible to the earth, we are always seen by God although we never see Him. When circumstances are adverse—and these circumstances are only too visible—it is hard not to doubt that God is still watching all that happens to us, because although we cry out in our agony no answer breaks the awful silence and no hand comes out of the clouds to hold us up. It seems as though our words were lost in the void. But that is only the impression of the moment. If we read history with the large vision of the Hebrew chronicler, can we fail to perceive that this is not a God-deserted world? In the details His presence may not be discerned, but when we stand back from the canvas and survey the whole picture, it flashes upon us like a sunbeam spread over the whole landscape. Many a man can recognise the same happy truth in the course of his own life as he looks back over a wide stretch of it, although while he was passing through his per-

plexing experience the thicket of difficulties intercepted his vision of the heavenly light.

Now it is a most painful result of unbelief and cowardice working on the consciousness of guilt lurking in the breast of every sinful man, that the "eye of God" has become an object of terror to the imagination of so many people. Poor Hagar's exclamation of joy and gratitude has been sadly misapprehended. Discovering to her amazement that she is not alone in the wilderness, the friendless, heart-broken slave-girl looks up through her tears with a smile of sudden joy on her face, and exclaims, "Thou God seest me!"* And yet her happy words have been held over terrified children as a menace! That is a false thought of God which makes any of His children shrink from His presence, except they are foul and leprous with sin, and even then their only refuge is, as St. Augustine found, to come to the very God against whom they have sinned. We need not fear lest some day God may make a miserable discovery about us. He knows the worst, already. Then it is a ground of hope that while He sees all the evil in us God still loves His children—that He does not love us, as it were, under a misapprehension. Our Lord's teaching on the subject of the Divine observation is wholly reassuring. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father's notice, the very hairs of our head are all numbered, and the exhortation based on these facts is not "Beware of the all-seeing Eye!" but "Fear not." †

The limitation of the chronicler's remark is significant. He speaks of the *eye* of God, not of God's mighty hand, nor of His outstretched arm. It was not

* Gen. xvi. 13. † Luke xii. 7.

yet the time for action; but God was watching the course of events. Or if God was acting, His procedure was so secret that no one could perceive it. Meanwhile it was enough to know that God was observing everything that was transpiring. He could not be thought of as an Epicurean divinity, surveying the agony and tragedy of human life with a stony gaze of supercilious indifference, as the proud patrician looks down on the misery of the dim multitude. For God to see is for God to care; and for God to care is for God to help. But this simple statement of the Divine observation maintains a reserve as to the method of the action of God, and it is perhaps the best way of describing Providence so that it shall not appear to come into collision with the free will of man.

The chronicler distinctly associates the Divine observation with the continuance of the Jews in their work. Because the eye of God was on them their enemies could not cause them to cease until the matter had been referred to Darius and his answer received. This may be explained by some unrecorded juncture of circumstances which arrested the action of the enemies of Israel; by the overruling Providence according to which the Satrap was led to perceive that it would not be wise or just for him to act until he had orders from the king; or by the new zeal with which the two prophets had inspired the Jews, so that they took up a bold position in the calm confidence that God was with them. Account for it as we may, we see that in the present case the Jews were not hindered in their work. It is enough for faith to perceive the result of the Divine care without discovering the process.

The letter of the Satrap and his secretary embodies the reply of the Jews to the official inquiries, and that

reply clearly and boldly sets forth their position. One or two points in it call for passing notice.

In the first place, the Jews describe themselves as "servants of the God of heaven and earth." Thus they start by mentioning their religious status, and not any facts about their race or nation. This was wise, and calculated to disarm suspicion as to their motives; and it was strictly true, for the Jews were engaged in a distinctly religious work. Then the way in which they describe their God is significant. They do not use the national name "Jehovah." That would serve no good purpose with men who did not know or acknowledge their special faith. They say nothing to localise and limit their idea of God. To build the temple of a tribal god would be to further the ends of the tribe, and this the jealous neighbours of the Jews supposed they were doing. By the larger title the Jews lift their work out of all connection with petty personal ends. In doing so they confess their true faith. These Jews of the return were pure monotheists. They believed that there was one God who ruled over heaven and earth.

In the second place, with just a touch of national pride, pathetic under the circumstances, they remind the Persians that their nation has seen better days, and that they are rebuilding the temple which a great king had set up. Thus, while they would appeal to the generosity of the authorities, they would claim their respect, with the dignity of men who know they have a great history. In view of this the next statement is most striking. Reciting the piteous story of the overthrow of their nation, the destruction of their temple, and the captivity of their fathers, the Jews ascribe it all to their national sins. The prophets had long ago discerned the connection of cause and effect in these

matters. But while it was only the subject of prediction, the proud people indignantly rejected the prophetic view. Since then their eyes had been opened by the painful purging of dire national calamities. One great proof that the nation had profited by the fiery ordeal of the captivity is that it now humbly acknowledged the sins which had brought it into the furnace. Trouble is illuminating. While it humbles men, it opens their eyes. It is better to see clearly in a lowly place than to walk blindfold on perilous heights.

After this explanatory preamble, the Jews appeal to the edict of Cyrus, and describe their subsequent conduct as a direct act of obedience to that edict. Thus they plead their cause as loyal subjects of the Persian empire. In consequence of this appeal, the Satrap and his secretary request the king to order a search to be made for the edict, and to reply according to his pleasure.

The chronicler then proceeds to relate how the search was prosecuted, first among the royal archives at Babylon—in "the house of books."* One of Mr. Layard's most valuable discoveries was that of a set of chambers in a palace at Koyunjik, the whole of the floor of which was covered more than a foot deep with terra-cotta tablets inscribed with public records.† A similar collection has been recently found in the neighbourhood of Babylon.‡ In some such record-house the search for the edict of Cyrus was made. But the cylinder or tablet on which it was written could not be found. The searchers then turned their attention to the roll-chamber at the winter palace of Ecbatana, and there

* Ezra vi. 1.

† "Nineveh and Babylon," p. 345.

‡ Bertheau-Ryssel, "Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch," p. 74.

a parchment or papyrus copy of the edict was discovered.

One of the items of this edict as it is now given is somewhat surprising, for it was not named in the earlier account in the first chapter of the Book of Ezra. This is a description of the dimensions of the temple which was to be built at Jerusalem. It must have been not a little humiliating to the Jews to have to take these measurements from a foreign sovereign, a heathen, a polytheist. Possibly, however, they had been first supplied to the king by the Jews, so that the builders might have the more explicit permission for what they were about to undertake. On the other hand, it may be that we have here the outside dimensions, beyond which the Jews were not permitted to go, and that the figures represent a limit for their ambitions. In either case the appearance of the details in the decree at all gives us a vivid conception of the thoroughness of the Persian autocracy, and of the perfect subjection of the Jews to Cyrus.

Some difficulty has been felt in interpreting the figures because they seem to point to a larger building than Solomon's temple. The height is given at sixty cubits, and the breadth at the same measurement. But Solomon's temple was only thirty cubits high, and its total breadth, with its side-chambers, was not more than forty cubits.* When we consider the comparative poverty of the returned Jews, the difficulties under which they laboured, the disappointment of the old men who had seen the former building, and the short time within which the work was finished—only four years † —it is difficult to believe that it was more than double the size of the glorious fabric for which David

* 1 Kings vi. 2. † Ezra iv. 24, vi. 15.

collected materials, on which Solomon lavished the best resources of his kingdom, and which even then took many more years in building. Perhaps the height includes the terrace on which the temple was built, and the breadth the temple adjuncts. Perhaps the temple never attained the dimensions authorised by the edict. But even if the full size were reached, the building would not have approached the size of the stupendous temples of the great ancient empires. Apart from its courts Solomon's temple was certainly a small building. It was not the size, but the splendour of that famous fabric that led to its being regarded with so much admiration and pride.

The most remarkable architectural feature of all these ancient temples was the enormous magnitude of the stones with which they were built. At the present day the visitor to Jerusalem gazes with wonder at huge blocks, all carefully chiselled and accurately fitted together, where parts of the old foundations may still be discerned. The narrative in Ezra makes several references to the great stones—"stones of rolling"* it calls them, because they could only be moved on rollers. Even the edict mentions "three rows of great stones," together with "a row of new timber,"†—an obscure phrase, which perhaps means that the walls were to be of the thickness of three stones, while the timber formed an inner pannelling; or that there were to be three storeys of stone and one of wood; or yet another possibility, that on three tiers of stone a tier of wood was to be laid. In the construction of the inner court of Solomon's temple this third method seems to have been followed, for we read, "And he built the

* Ezra v. 8. † Ezra vi. 4.

inner court with three rows of hewn stone and a row of cedar beams."* However we regard it—and the plan is confusing and a matter of much discussion—the impression is one of massive strength. The jealous observers noted especially the building of "the wall" of the temple.† So solid a piece of work might be turned into a fortification. But no such end seems to have been contemplated by the Jews. They built solidly because they wished their work to stand. It was to be no temporary tabernacle; but a permanent temple designed to endure to posterity. We are struck with the massive character of the Roman remains in Britain, which show that when the great world conquerors took possession of our island they settled down in it and regarded it as a permanent property. The same grand consciousness of permanence must have been in the minds of the brave builders who planted this solid structure at Jerusalem in the midst of troubles and threatenings of disaster. To-day, when we look at the stupendous Phœnician and Jewish architecture of Syria, we are struck with admiration at the patience, the perseverance, the industry, the thoroughness, the largeness of idea that characterised the work of these old-world builders. Surely it must have been the outcome of a similar tone and temper of mind. The modern mind may be more nimble, as the modern work is more expeditious. But for steadfastness of purpose the races that wrought so patiently at great enduring works seem to have excelled anything we can attain. And yet here and there a similar characteristic is observable—as, for example, in the self-restraint and continuous toil of Charles Darwin, when he collected

* 1 Kings vi. 36. † Ezra v. 9.

facts for twenty years before he published the book which embodied the conclusion he had drawn from his wide induction.

The solid character of the temple-building is further suggestive, because the work was all done for the service of God. Such work should never be hasty, because God has the leisure of eternity in which to inspect it. It is labour lost to make it superficial and showy without any real strength, because God sees behind all pretences. Moreover, the fire will try every man's work of what sort it is. We grow impatient of toil; we weary for quick results; we forget that in building the spiritual temple strength to endure the shocks of temptation and to outlast the decay of time is more valued by God than the gourd-like display which is the sensation of the hour, only to perish as quickly as it has sprung up.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE.

Ezra vi. 6-22.

THE chronicler's version of the edict in which Darius replies to the application of the Satrap Tattenai is so very friendly to the Jews that questions have been raised as to its genuineness. We cannot but perceive that the language has been modified in its transition from the Persian terra-cotta cylinder to the roll of the Hebrew chronicler, because the Great King could not have spoken of the religion of Israel in the absolute phrases recorded in the Book of Ezra. But when all allowance has been made for verbal alterations in translation and transcription, the substance of the edict is still sufficiently remarkable. Darius fully endorses the decree of Cyrus, and even exceeds that gracious ordinance in generosity. He curtly bids Tattenai "let the work of the house of God alone." He even orders the Satrap to provide for this work out of the revenues of his district. The public revenues are also to be used in maintaining the Jewish priests and in providing them with sacrifices—"that they may offer sacrifices of sweet savour unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and of his sons." *

* Ezra vi. 10.

On the other hand, it cannot be doubted that Darius sent a reply that was favourable to the Jews, for all opposition to their work was stopped, and means were found for completing the temple and maintaining the costly ritual. The Jews gratefully acknowledged the influence of God on the heart of Darius. Surely they were right in doing so. They were gifted with the true insight of faith. It is no contradiction to add that—in the earthly sphere and among the human motives through which God works, by guiding them—what we know of Darius will account to some extent for his friendliness towards the Jews. He was a powerful ruler, and when he had quelled the serious rebellions that had broken out in several quarters of his kingdom, he organised his government in a masterly style with a new and thorough system of satrapies.* Then he pushed his conquests farther afield, and subsequently came into contact with Europe, although ultimately to suffer a humiliating defeat in the famous battle of Marathon. In fact, we may regard him as the real founder of the Persian Empire. Cyrus, though his family was of Persian origin, was originally a king of Elam, and he had to conquer Persia before he could rule over it; but Darius was a prince of the Persian royal house. Unlike Cyrus, he was at least a monotheist, if not a thoroughgoing Zoroastrian. The inscription on his tomb at *Naksh-i-Rustem* attributes all that he has achieved to the favour of Ormazd. "When Ormazd saw this earth filled with revolt and civil war, then did he entrust it to me. He made me king, and I am king. By the grace of Ormazd I have restored the earth." "All that I have done I have done

* Herodotus, iii. 89.

through the grace of Ormazd. Ormazd brought help to me until I had completed my work. May Ormazd protect from evil me and my house and this land. Therefore I pray unto Ormazd, May Ormazd grant this to me." "O Man! May the command of Ormazd not be despised by thee: leave not the path of right, sin not!" * Such language implies a high religious conception of life. Although it is a mistake to suppose that the Jews had borrowed anything of importance from Zoroastrianism during the captivity or in the time of Cyrus—inasmuch as that religion was then scarcely known in Babylon—when it began to make itself felt there, its similarity to Judaism could not fail to strike the attention of observant men. It taught the existence of one supreme God—though it co-ordinated the principles of good and evil in His being, as two subsidiary existences, in a manner not allowed by Judaism—and it encouraged prayer. It also insisted on the dreadful evil of sin and urged men to strive after purity, with an earnestness that witnessed to the blending of morality with religion to an extent unknown elsewhere except among the Jews. Thus, if Darius were a Zoroastrian, he would have two powerful links of sympathy with the Jews in opposition to the corrupt idolatry of the heathen —the spiritual monotheism and the earnest morality that were common to the two religions. And in any case it is not altogether surprising to learn that when he read the letter of the people who described themselves as "the servants of the God of heaven and earth," the worshipper of Ormazd should have sympathised with them rather than with their semi-pagan opponents. Moreover, Darius must have known something of

* Sayce, Introduction, pp. 57, 58.

Judaism from the Jews of Babylon. Then, he was restoring the temples of Ormazd which his predecessor had destroyed. But the Jews were engaged in a very similar work; therefore the king, in his antipathy to the idolaters, would give no sanction to a heathenish opposition to the building of the temple at Jerusalem by a people who believed in One Spiritual God.

Darius was credited with a generous disposition, which would incline him to a kindly treatment of his subjects. Of course we must interpret this according to the manners of the times. For example, in his edict about the temple-building he gives orders that any one of his subjects who hinders the work is to be impaled on a beam from his own house, the site of which is to be used for a refuse heap.* Darius also invokes the God of the Jews to destroy any foreign king or people who should attempt to alter or destroy the temple at Jerusalem. The savagery of his menace is in harmony with his conduct when, according to Herodotus, he impaled *three thousand* men at Babylon after he had recaptured the city.† Those were cruel times—Herodotus tells us that the besieged Babylonians had previously strangled their own wives when they were running short of provisions.‡ The imprecation with which the edict closes may be matched by one on the inscription of Darius at *Behistun*, where the Great King invokes the curse of Ormazd on any persons who should injure the tablet. The ancient despotic world-rulers had no conception of the modern virtue of humanitarianism. It is sickening to picture to ourselves their methods of government. The enormous misery involved is beyond

* Ezra vi. 11. † Herodotus, iii. 159.
‡ *Ibid.*

calculation. Still we may believe that the worst threats were not always carried out; we may make some allowance for Oriental extravagance of language. And yet, after all has been said, the conclusion of the edict of Darius presents to us a kind of state support for religion which no one would defend in the present day. In accepting the help of the Persian sovereign the Jews could not altogether dissociate themselves from his way of government. Nevertheless it is fair to remember that they had not asked for his support. They had simply desired to be left unmolested.

Tattenai loyally executed the decree of Darius; the temple-building proceeded without further hindrance, and the work was completed about four years after its recommencement at the instigation of the prophet Haggai. Then came the joyous ceremony of the dedication. All the returned exiles took part in it. They are named collectively "the children of Israel"—another indication that the restored Jews were regarded by the chronicler as the representatives of the whole united nation as this had existed under David and Solomon before the great schism. Similarly there are *twelve* he-goats for the sin-offering—for the twelve tribes.* Several classes of Israelites are enumerated,—first the clergy in their two orders, the priests and the Levites, always kept distinct in "Ezra"; next the laity, who are described as "the children of the captivity." The limitation of this phrase is significant. In the dedication of the temple the Israelites of the land who were mixed up with the heathen people are not included. Only the returned exiles had built the temple; only they were associated in the dedication of

* Ezra vi. 17.

it. Here is a strictly guarded Church. Access to it is through the one door of an unimpeachable genealogical record. Happily the narrowness of this arrangement is soon to be broken through. In the meanwhile it is to be observed that it is just the people who have endured the hardship of separation from their beloved Jerusalem to whom the privilege of rejoicing in the completion of the new temple is given. The tame existence that cannot fathom the depths of misery is incapable of soaring to the heights of bliss. The joy of the harvest is for those who have sown in tears.

The work was finished, and yet its very completion was a new commencement. The temple was now dedicated—literally "initiated"—for the future service of God.

This dedication is an instance of the highest use of man's work. The fruit of years of toil and sacrifice is given to God. Whatever theories we may have about the consecration of a building—and surely every building that is put to a sacred use is in a sense a sacred building—there can be no question as to the rightness of dedication. This is just the surrender to God of what was built for Him out of the resources that He had supplied. A dedication service is a solemn act of transfer by which a building is given over to the use of God. We may save it from narrowness if we do not limit it to places of public assembly. The home where the family altar is set up, where day by day prayer is offered, and where the common round of domestic duties is elevated and consecrated by being faithfully discharged as in the sight of God, is a true sanctuary; it too, like the Jerusalem temple, has its "Holy of Holies." Therefore when a family enters a new house, or when two young lives cross the threshold

of what is to be henceforth their "home," there is as true a ground for a solemn act of dedication as in the opening of a great temple. A prophet declared that "Holiness to the Lord" was to characterise the very vessels of household use in Jerusalem.* It may lift some of the burden of drudgery which presses on people who are compelled to spend their time in common house-toil, for them to perceive that they may become priests and priestesses ministering at the altar even in their daily work. In the same spirit truly devout men of business will dedicate their shops, their factories, their offices, the tools of their work, and the enterprises in which they engage, so that all may be regarded as belonging to God, and only to be used as His will dictates. Behind every such act of dedication there must be a prior act of self-consecration, without which the gift of any mere thing to God is but an insult to the Father who only seeks the hearts of His children. Nay, without this a real gift of any kind is impossible. But the people who have first given their own selves to the Lord are prepared for all other acts of surrender.

According to the custom of their ritual, the Jews signalised the dedication of the temple by the offering of sacrifices. Even with the help of the king's bounty these were few in number compared with the lavish holocausts that were offered in the ceremony of dedicating Solomon's temple.† Here, in the external aspect of things, the melancholy archæologists might have found another cause for lamentation. But we are not told that any such people appeared on the present occasion. The Jews were not so foolish as to believe that the value of a religious movement could be ascertained

* Zech. xiv. 21. † 1 Kings viii. 63.

by the study of architectural dimensions. Is it less misleading to attempt to estimate the spiritual prosperity of a Church by casting up the items of its balance-sheet, or tabulating the numbers of its congregations?

Looking more closely into the chronicler's description of the sacrifices, we see that these were principally of two distinct kinds.* There were some animals for burnt-offerings, which signified complete dedication, and pledged their offerers to it. Then there were other animals for sin-offerings. Thus even in the joyous dedication of the temple the sin of Israel could not be forgotten. The increasing importance of sacrifices for sin is one of the most marked features of the Hebrew ritual in its later stages of development. It shows that in the course of ages the national consciousness of sin was intensified. At the same time it makes it clear that the inexplicable conviction that without shedding of blood there could be no remission of sins was also deepened. Whether the sacrifice was regarded as a gift pleasing and propitiating an offended God, or as a substitute bearing the death-penalty of sin, or as a sacred life, bestowing, by means of its blood, new life on sinners who had forfeited their own lives; in any case, and however it was interpreted, it was felt that blood must be shed if the sinner was to be freed from guilt. Throughout the ages this awful thought was more and more vividly presented, and the mystery which the conscience of many refused to abandon continued, until there was a great revelation of the true meaning of sacrifice for sin in the one efficacious atonement of Christ.

* Ezra vi. 17.

A subsidiary point to be noticed here is that there were just *twelve* he-goats sacrificed for the twelve tribes of Israel. These were national sin-offerings, and not sacrifices for individual sinners. Under special circumstances the individual could bring his own private offering. But in this great temple function only national sins were considered. The nation had suffered as a whole for its collective sin; in a corresponding way it had its collective expiation of sin. There are always national sins which need a broad public treatment, apart from the particular acts of wickedness committed by separate men.

All this is said by the chronicler to have taken place in accordance with The Law—"As it is written in the book of Moses."* Here, as in the case of the similar statement of the chronicler in connection with the sacrifices offered when the great altar of burnt-offerings was set up,† we must remember, in the first place, that we have to do with the reflections of an author writing in a subsequent age, to whom the whole Pentateuch was a familiar book. But then it is also clear that before Ezra had startled the Jews by reading The Law in its later revelation there must have been some earlier form of it, not only in Deuteronomy, but also in a priestly collection of ordinances. It is a curious fact that no full directions on the division of the courses of the priests and Levites is now to be found in the Pentateuch. On this occasion the services must have been arranged on the model of the traditional priestly law. They were not left to the caprice of the hour. There was order; there was continuity; there was obedience.

The chronicler concludes this period of his history

* Ezra vi. 18. † Ezra iii. 2.

by adding a paragraph * on the first observance of the Passover among the returned Jews. The national religion is now re-established, and therefore the greatest festival of the year can be enjoyed. One of the characteristics of this festival is made especially prominent in the present observance of it. The significance of the unleavened bread is pointedly noticed. All leaven is to be banished from the houses during the week of the Passover. All impurity must also be banished from the people. The priests and Levites perform the ceremonial purifications and get themselves legally clean. The franchise is enlarged; and the limitations of genealogy with which we started are dispensed with. A new class of Israelites receives a brotherly welcome in this time of general purification. In distinction from the returned captives, there are now the Israelites who "had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord." Jehovah is pointedly described as "the God of Israel"—*i.e.*, the God of all sections of Israel.† These people cannot be proselytes from heathenism—there could be few if any such in exclusive times. They might consist of Jews who had been living in Palestine all through the captivity, Israelites also left in the Northern Kingdom, and scattered members of the ten tribes from various regions. All such are welcome on condition of a severe process of social purging. They must break off from their heathen associations. We may suspect a spirit of Jewish animosity in the ugly phrase "the filthiness of the heathen." But it was only too true that both

* Here, at Ezra vi. 18, the author drops the Aramaic language—which was introduced at iv. 8—and resumes the Hebrew. See page 71.

† Ezra vi. 21.

the Canaanite and the Babylonian habits of life were disgustingly immoral. The same horrible characteristic is found among most of the heathen to-day. These degraded people are not simply benighted in theological error; they are corrupted by horrible vices. Missionary work is more than the propagation of Christian theology; it is the purging of Augean stables. St. Paul reminds us that we must put away the old leaven of sinful habits in order to partake of the Christian Passover,* and St. James that one feature of the religious service which is acceptable to God is to keep oneself unspotted from the world.† Though unfortunately with the externalism of the Jews their purification too often became a mere ceremony, and their separation an ungracious race-exclusiveness, still, at the root of it, the Passover idea here brought before us is profoundly true. It is the thought that we cannot take part in a sacred feast of Divine gladness except on condition of renouncing sin. The joy of the Lord is the beatific vision of saints, the blessedness of the pure in heart who see God.

On this condition, for the people who were thus separate, the festival was a scene of great gladness. The chronicler calls attention to three things that were in the mind of the Jews inspiring their praises throughout.‡ The first is that God was the source of their joy—"the Lord had made them joyful." There is joy in religion; and this joy springs from God. The second is that God had brought about the successful end of their labours by directly influencing the Great King. He had "turned the heart of the king of Assyria"—a title

* 1 Cor. v. 7. † James i. 27.

‡ Ezra vi. 22.

for Darius that speaks for the authenticity of the narrative, for it represents an old form of speech for the ruler of the districts that had once belonged to the king of Assyria. The third fact is that God had been the source of strength to the Jews, so that they had been able to complete their work. The result of the Divine aid was "to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." Among His own people joy and strength from God, in the great world a providential direction of the mind of the king—this was what faith now perceived, and the perception of so wonderful a Divine activity made the Passover a festival of boundless gladness. Wherever that ancient Hebrew faith is experienced in conjunction with the Passover spirit of separation from the leaven of sin religion always is a well of joy.

CHAPTER X.

EZRA THE SCRIBE.

Ezra vii. 1-10.

ALTHOUGH the seventh chapter of "Ezra" begins with no other indication of time than the vague phrase "Now after these things," nearly sixty years had elapsed between the events recorded in the previous chapter and the mission of Ezra here described. We have no history of this long period. Zerubbabel passed into obscurity without leaving any trace of his later years. He had accomplished his work; the temple had been built; but the brilliant Messianic anticipations that had clustered about him at the outset of his career were to await their fulfilment in a greater Son of David, and people could afford to neglect the memory of the man who had only been a sort of temporary trustee of the hope of Israel. We shall come across indications of the effects of social trouble and religious decadence in the state of Jerusalem as she appeared at the opening of this new chapter in her history. She had not recovered a vestige of her ancient civic splendour; the puritan rigour with which the returned exiles had founded a Church among the ruins of her political greatness had been relaxed, so that the one distinguishing feature of the humble colony was in danger of melting away in easy and friendly associations

with neighbouring peoples. When it came, the revival of zeal did not originate in the Holy City. It sprang up among the Jews at Babylon. The earlier movement in the reign of Cyrus had arisen in the same quarter. The best of Judaism was no product of the soil of Palestine: it was an exotic. The elementary "Torah" of Moses emerged from the desert, with the learning of Egypt as its background, long before it was cultivated at Jerusalem to blossom in the reformation of Josiah. The final edition of The Law was shaped in the Valley of the Euphrates, with the literature and science of Babylon to train its editors for their great task, though it may have received its finishing touches in Jerusalem. These facts by no means obscure the glory of the inspiration and Divine character of The Law. In its theology, in its ethics, in its whole spirit and character, the Pentateuch is no more a product of Babylonian than of Egyptian ideas. Its purity and elevation of character speak all the more emphatically for its Divine origin when we take into account its corrupt surroundings; it was like a white lily growing on a dung-heap.

Still it is important to notice that the great religious revival of Ezra's time sprang up on the plains of Babylon, not among the hills of Judah. This involves two very different facts—the peculiar spiritual experience with which it commenced, and the special literary and scientific culture in the midst of which it was shaped.

First, it originated in the experience of the captivity, in humiliation and loss, and after long brooding over the meaning of the great chastisement. The exiles were like poets who "learn in sorrow what they teach in song." This is apparent in the pathetic psalms of the same period, and in the writings of the visionary of

Chebar, who contributed a large share to the new movement in view of the re-establishment of religious worship at Jerusalem.

Thus Jerusalem was loved by the exiles, the temple pictured in detail to the imagination of men who never trod its sacred courts, and the sacrificial system most carefully studied by people who had no means of putting it in practice. No doubt The Law now represented an intellectual rather than a concrete form of religion. It was an ideal. So long as the real is with us, it tends to depress the ideal by its material bulk and weight. The ideal is elevated in the absence of the real. Therefore the pauses of life are invaluable; by breaking through the iron routine of habit, they give us scope for the growth of larger ideas that may lead to better attainments.

Secondly, this religious revival appeared in a centre of scientific and literary culture. The Babylonians "had cultivated arithmetic, astronomy, history, chronology, geography, comparative philology, and grammar." * In astronomy they were so advanced that they had mapped out the heavens, catalogued the fixed stars, calculated eclipses, and accounted for them correctly. Their enormous libraries of terra-cotta, only now being unearthed, testify to their literary activity. The Jews brought back from Babylon the names of the months, the new form of letters used in writing their books, and many other products of the learning and science of the Euphrates. Internally the religion of Israel is solitary, pure, Divine. Externally the literary form of it, and the physical conception of the universe which it embodies, owe not a little to the light which

* Rawlinson, "Ezra and Nehemiah," p. 2.

God had bestowed upon the people of Babylon; just as Christianity, in soul and essence the religion of Jesus of Nazareth, was shaped in theory by the thought, and in discipline by the law and order, with which God had endowed the two great European races of Greece and Rome.

The chronicler introduces Ezra with a brief sketch of his origin and a bare outline of his expedition to Jerusalem.* He then next transcribes a copy of the edict of Artaxerxes which authorised the expedition.† After this he inserts a detailed account of the expedition from the pen of Ezra himself, so that here the narrative proceeds in the first person—though, in the abrupt manner of the whole book, without a word of warning that this is to be the case.‡

In the opening verses of Ezra vii. the chronicler gives an epitome of the genealogy of Ezra, passing over several generations, but leading up to Aaron. Ezra, then, could claim a high birth. He was a born priest of the select family of Zadok, but not of the later house of high-priests. Therefore the privileges which are assigned to that house in the Pentateuch cannot be accounted for by ascribing ignoble motives of nepotism to its publisher. Though Ezra is named "The Priest," he is more familiarly known to us as "The Scribe." The chronicler calls him "a ready scribe" (or, a scribe skilful) "in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given." Originally the title "Scribe" was used for town recorders and registrars of the census. Under the later kings of Judah, persons bearing this name were attached to the court as the

* Ezra vii. 1-10. † Ezra vii. 11-26.
‡ Ezra vii. 27—ix.

writers and custodians of state documents. But these are all quite distinct from the scribes who appeared after the exile. The scribes of later days were guardians and interpreters of the written Torah, the sacred law. They appeared with the publication and adoption of the Pentateuch. They not only studied and taught this complete law; they interpreted and applied its precepts. In so doing they had to pronounce judgments of their own. Inasmuch as changing circumstances necessarily required modifications in rules of justice, while The Law could not be altered after Ezra's day, great ingenuity was required to reconcile the old law with the new decisions. Thus arose sophistical casuistry. Then in "fencing" The Law the scribes added precepts of their own to prevent men from coming near the danger of transgression.

Scribism was one of the most remarkable features of the later days of Israel. Its existence in so much prominence showed that religion had passed into a new phase, that it had assumed a literary aspect. The art of writing was known, indeed, in Egypt and Babylon before the exodus; it was even practised in Palestine among the Hittites as early as Abraham. But at first in their religious life the Jews did not give much heed to literary documents. Priestism was regulated by traditional usages rather than by written directions, and justice was administered under the kings according to custom, precedent, and equity. Quite apart from the discussion concerning the antiquity of the Pentateuch, it is certain that its precepts were neither used nor known in the time of Josiah, when the reading of the roll discovered in the temple was listened to with amazement. Still less did prophetism rely on literary resources. What need was there of a book when the

Spirit of God was speaking through the audible voice of a living man? At first the prophets were men of action. In more cultivated times they became orators, and then their speeches were sometimes preserved—as the speeches of Demosthenes were preserved—for future reference, after their primary end had been served. Jeremiah found it necessary to have a scribe, Baruch, to write down his utterances. This was a further step in the direction of literature; and Ezekiel was almost entirely literary, for his prophecies were most of them written in the first instance. Still they were prophecies; *i.e.*, they were original utterances, drawn directly from the wells of inspiration. The function of the scribes was more humble—to collect the sayings and traditions of earlier ages; to arrange and edit the literary fragments of more original minds. Their own originality was almost confined to their explanations of difficult passages, or their adaptation of what they received to new needs and new circumstances. Thus we see theology passing into the reflective stage: it is becoming historical; it is being transformed into a branch of archæology. Ezra the Scribe is nervously anxious to claim the authority of Moses for what he teaches. The robust spirit of Isaiah was troubled with no such scruple. Scribism rose when prophecy declined. It was a melancholy confession that the fountains of living water were drying up. It was like an aqueduct laboriously constructed in order to convey stored water to a thirsty people from distant reservoirs. The reservoirs may be full, the aqueduct may be sound; still who would not rather drink of the sparkling stream as it springs from the rock? Moreover scribism degenerated into rabbinism, the scholasticism of the Jews. We may see its counterpart in the Catholic scholasticism which drew supplies

from patristic tradition, and again in Protestant scholasticism—which came nearer to the source of inspiration in the Bible, and yet which stiffened into a traditional interpretation of Scripture, confining its waters to iron pipes of orthodoxy.

But some men refuse to be thus tied to antiquarianism. They dare to believe that the Spirit of God is still in the world, whispering in the fancy of little children, soothing weary souls, thundering in the conscience of sinners, enlightening honest inquirers, guiding perplexed men of faith. Nevertheless we are always in danger of one or other of the two extremes of formal scholasticism and indefinite mysticism. The good side of the scribes' function is suggestive of much that is valuable. If God did indeed speak to men of old "in divers portions and in divers manners,"* what He said must be of the greatest value to us, for truth in its essence is eternal. We Christians have the solid foundation of a historical faith to build upon, and we cannot dispense with our gospel narratives and doctrinal epistles. What Christ was, what Christ did, and the meaning of all this, is of vital importance to us; but it is chiefly important because it enables us to see what He is to-day—a Priest ever living to make intercession for us, a Deliverer who is even now able to save unto the uttermost all who come unto God by Him, a present Lord who claims the active loyalty of every fresh generation of the men and women for whom He died in the far-off past. We have to combine the concrete historical religion with the inward, living, spiritual religion to reach a faith that shall be true both objectively and subjectively—true to the facts of the universe, and true to personal experience.

* Heb. i. 1.

Ezra accomplished his great work, to a large extent, because he ventured to be more than a scribe. Even when he was relying on the authority of antiquity, the inspiration which was in him saved him from a pedantic adherence to the letter of the Torah as he had received it. The modification of The Law when it was reissued by the great scribe, which is so perplexing to some modern readers, is a proof that the religion of Israel had not yet lost vitality and settled down into a fossil condition. It was living; therefore it was growing, and in growing it was casting its old shell and evolving a new vesture better adapted to its changed environment. Is not this just a signal proof that God had not deserted His people?

Ezra is presented to us as a man of a deeply devout nature. He cultivated his own personal religion before he attempted to influence his compatriots. The chronicler tells us that he had prepared (directed) his heart, to seek the law of the Lord and to do it. With our haste to obtain "results" in Christian service, there is danger lest the need of personal preparation should be neglected. But work is feeble and fruitless if the worker is inefficient, and he must be quite as inefficient if he has not the necessary graces as if he had not the requisite gifts. Over and above the preparatory intellectual culture—never more needed than in our own day—there is the all-essential spiritual training. We cannot effectually win others to that truth which has no place in our own hearts. Enthusiasm is kindled by enthusiasm. The fire must be first burning within the preacher himself if he would light it in the breasts of other men. Here lies the secret of the tremendous influence Ezra exerted when he came to Jerusalem. He was an enthusiast for the law he so zealously advocated.

Now enthusiasm is not the creation of a moment's thought; it is the outgrowth of long meditation, inspired by deep, passionate love. It shows itself in the experience expressed by the Psalmist when he said, "While I mused the fire burned."* Ours is not an age of musing. But if we have no time to meditate over the great verities of our faith, the flames will not be kindled, and in place of the glowing fire of enthusiasm we shall have the gritty ashes of officialism.

Ezra turned his thoughts to the law of his God; he took this for the subject of his daily meditation, brooding over it until it became a part of his own thinking. This is the way a character is made. Men have larger power over their thoughts than they are inclined to admit; and the greatness or the meanness, the purity or the corruption of their character depends on the way in which that power is used. Evil thoughts may come unbidden to the purest mind—for Christ was tempted by the devil; but such thoughts can be resisted, and treated as unwelcome intruders. The thoughts that are welcomed and cherished, nourished in meditation, and sedulously cultivated—these bosom friends of the inner man determine what he himself is to become. To allow one's mind to be treated as the plaything of every idle reverie—like a boat drifting at the mercy of wind and current without a hand at the helm—is to court intellectual and moral shipwreck. The first condition of achieving success in self-culture is to direct the course of the thinking aright. St. Paul enumerated a list of good and honourable subjects to bid us "think on" such things.†

The aim of Ezra's meditation was threefold. First, he would "seek the law of the Lord," for the teacher

* Psalm xxxix. 3. † Phil. iv. 8.

must begin with understanding the truth, and this may involve much anxious searching. Possibly Ezra had to pursue a literary inquiry, hunting up documents, comparing data, arranging and harmonising scattered fragments. But the most important part of his seeking was his effort to find the real meaning and purpose of The Law. It was in regard to this that he would have to exercise his mind most earnestly. Secondly, his aim was "to do it." He would not attempt to preach what he had not tried to perform. He would test the effect of his doctrine on himself before venturing to prescribe it for others. Thus he would be most sure of escaping a subtle snare which too often entraps the preacher. When the godly man of business reads his Bible, it is just to find light and food for his own soul; but when the preacher turns the pages of the sacred book, he is haunted by the anxiety to light upon suitable subjects for his sermons. Every man who handles religious truths in the course of his work is in danger of coming to regard those truths as the tools of his trade. If he succumbs to this danger it will be to his own personal loss, and then even as instruments in his work the degraded truths will be blunt and inefficient, because a man can never know the doctrine until he has begun to obey the commandment. If religious teaching is not to be pedantic and unreal, it must be interpreted by experience. The most vivid teaching is a transcript from life. Thirdly, Ezra would "teach in Israel statutes and judgments." This necessarily comes last—after the meditation, after the experience. But it is of great significance as the crown and finish of the rest. Ezra is to be his nation's instructor. In the new order the first place is not to be reserved for a king; it is assigned to a schoolmaster.

This will be increasingly the case as knowledge is allowed to prevail, and as truth is permitted to sway the lives of men and fashion the history of communities.

So far we have Ezra's own character and culture. But there was another side to his preparation for his great life-work of which the chronicler took note, and which he described in a favourite phrase of Ezra's, a phrase so often used by the scribe that the later writer adopted it quite naturally. Ezra's request to be permitted to go up to Jerusalem with a new expedition is said to have been granted him by the king "according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him." * Thus the chronicler here acknowledges the Divine hand in the whole business, as he has the inspired insight to do again and again in the course of his narrative. The special phrase thus borrowed from Ezra is rich in meaning. In an earlier passage the chronicler noticed that "the *eye* of their God was upon the elders of the Jews." † Now, in Ezra's phrase, it is the *hand* of his God that is on Ezra. The expression gives us a distinct indication of the Divine activity. God works, and, so to speak, uses His hand. It also suggests the nearness of God. The hand of God is not only moving and acting; it is upon Ezra. God touches the man, holds him, directs him, impels him; and, as he shows elsewhere, Ezra is conscious of the influence, if not immediately, yet by means of a devout study of the providential results. This Divine power even goes so far as to move the Persian monarch. The chronicler ascribes the conduct of successive kings of Persia to the immediate action of God. But here it is connected

* Ezra vii. 6. † Ezra v. 5.

with God's hand being on Ezra. When God is holding and directing His servants, even external circumstances are found to work for their good, and even other men are induced to further the same end. This brings us to the kernel, the very essence of religion. That was not found in Ezra's wisely chosen meditations; nor was it to be seen in his devout practices. Behind and beneath the man's earnest piety was the unseen but mighty action of God; and here, in the hand of his God resting upon him, was the root of all his religious life. In experience the human and the Divine elements of religion are inextricably blended together; but the vital element, that which originates and dominates the whole, is the Divine. There is no real, living religion without it. It is the secret of energy and the assurance of victory. The man of true religion is he who has the hand of God resting upon him, he whose thought and action are inspired and swayed by the mystic touch of the Unseen.

CHAPTER XI.

EZRA'S EXPEDITION.

Ezra vii. 11—viii.

LIKE the earlier pilgrimage of Zerubbabel and his companions, Ezra's great expedition was carried out under a commission from the Persian monarch of his day. The chronicler simply calls this king "Artaxerxes" (*Artahshashta*), a name borne by three kings of Persia; but there can be no reasonable doubt that his reference is to the son and successor of Xerxes —known by the Greeks as "Macrocheir," and by the Romans as "Longimanus"—Artaxerxes "of the long hand," for this Artaxerxes alone enjoyed a sufficiently extended reign to include both the commencement of Ezra's public work and the later scenes in the life of Nehemiah which the chronicler associates with the same king. Artaxerxes was but a boy when he ascended the throne, and the mission of Ezra took place in his earlier years, while the generous enthusiasm of the kindly sovereign—whose gentleness has become historic —had not yet been crushed by the cares of empire. In accordance with the usual style of our narrative, we have his decree concerning the Jews preserved and transcribed in full; and yet here, as in other cases, we must make some allowance either for the literary freedom of the chronicler, or for the Jewish sympathies of the

translator; for it cannot be supposed that a heathen, such as Artaxerxes undoubtedly was, would have shown the knowledge of the Hebrew religion, or have owned the faith in it, which the edict as we now have it suggests. Nevertheless, here again, there is no reason to doubt the substantial accuracy of the document, for it is quite in accord with the policy of the previous kings Cyrus and Darius, and in its special features it entirely agrees with the circumstances of the history.

This edict of Longimanus goes beyond any of its predecessors in favouring the Jews, especially with regard to their religion. It is directly and personally addressed to Ezra, whom the king may have known as an earnest, zealous leader of the Hebrew community at Babylon, and through him it grants to all Jewish exiles who wish to go up to Jerusalem liberty to return to the home of their fathers. It may be objected that after the decree of Cyrus any such fresh sanction should not have been needed. But two generations had passed away since the pilgrimage of the first body of returning captives, and during this long time many things had happened to check the free action of the Jews and to cast reproach upon their movements. For a great expedition to start now without any orders from the reigning monarch might excite his displeasure, and a subject people who were dependent for their very existence on the good-will of an absolute sovereign would naturally hesitate before they ventured to rouse his suspicions by undertaking any considerable migration on their own account.

But Artaxerxes does much more than sanction the journey to Jerusalem; he furthers the object of this journey with royal bounty, and he lays a very important commission on Ezra, a commission which carries with

it the power, if not the name, of a provincial magistrate. In the first place, the edict authorises a state endowment of the Jewish religion. Ezra is to carry great stores to the poverty-stricken community at Jerusalem. These are made up in part of contributions from the Babylonian Jews, in part of generous gifts from their friendly neighbours, and in part of grants from the royal treasury. The temple has been rebuilt, and the funds now accumulated are not like the bulk of those collected in the reign of Cyrus for a definite object, the cost of which might be set down to the "Capital Account" in the restoration of the Jews; they are destined in some measure for improvements to the structure, but they are also to be employed in maintenance charges, especially in supporting the costly services of the temple. Thus the actual performance of the daily ritual at the Jerusalem sanctuary is to be kept up by means of the revenues of the Persian Empire. Then, the edict proceeds to favour the priesthood by freeing that order from the burden of taxation. This "clerical immunity," which suggests an analogy with the privileges the Christian clergy prized so highly in the Middle Ages, is an indirect form of increased endowment, but the manner in which the endowment is granted calls especial attention to the privileged status of the order that enjoys it. Thus the growing importance of the Jerusalem hierarchy is openly fostered by the Persian king. Still further, Artaxerxes adds to his endowment of the Jewish religion a direct legal establishment. Ezra is charged to see that the law of his God is observed throughout the whole region extending up from the Euphrates to Jerusalem. This can only be meant to apply to the Jews who were scattered over the wide area, especially those of Syria. Still the mandate

is startling enough, especially when we take into account the heavy sanctions with which it is weighted, for Ezra has authority given him to enforce obedience by excommunication, by fine, by imprisonment, and even by the death-penalty. "The law of his God" is named side by side with "the law of the king,"* and the two are to be obeyed equally. Fortunately, owing to the unsettled condition of the country as well as to Ezra's own somewhat unpractical disposition, the reformer never seems to have put his great powers fully to the test.

Now, as in the previous cases of Cyrus and Darius, we are confronted with the question, How came the Persian king to issue such a decree? It has been suggested that as Egypt was in revolt at the time, he desired to strengthen the friendly colony at Jerusalem as a western bulwark. But, as we have seen in the case of Cyrus, the Jews were too few and feeble to be taken much account of among the gigantic forces of the vast empire; and, moreover, it was not the military fortification of Jerusalem—certainly a valuable stronghold when well maintained—but the religious services of the temple and the observance of The Law that this edict aimed at aiding and encouraging. No doubt in times of unsettlement the king would behave most favourably towards a loyal section of his people. Still, more must be assigned as an adequate motive for his action. Ezra is charged as a special commissioner to investigate the condition of the Jews in Palestine. He is to "inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem."† Inasmuch as it was customary for the Persian monarchs to send out inspectors from time to time to examine

* Ezra vii. 26. † Ezra vii. 14.

and report on the condition of the more remote districts of their extensive empire, it has been plausibly suggested that Ezra may have been similarly employed. But in the chronicler's report of the edict we read, immediately after the injunction to make the investigation, an important addition describing how this was to be done, viz., "According to the law of thy God which is in thine hand," * which shows that Ezra's inquiry was to be of a religious character, and as a preliminary to the exaction of obedience to the Jewish law. It may be said that this clause was not a part of the original decree; but the drift of the edict is religious throughout rather than political, and therefore the clause in question is fully in harmony with its character. There is one sentence which is of the deepest significance, if only we can believe that it embodies an original utterance of the king himself—"Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of heaven; *for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?*" † While his empire was threatened by dangerous revolts, Artaxerxes seems to have desired to conciliate the God whom the most devout of his people regarded with supreme awe.

What is more clear and at the same time more important is the great truth detected by Ezra and recorded by him in a grateful burst of praise. Without any warning the chronicler suddenly breaks off his own narrative, written in the third person, to insert a narrative written by Ezra himself in the first person—beginning at Ezra vii. 27 and continued down to Ezra x. The scribe opens by blessing God—"the Lord God of our fathers," who had "put such a thing in the king's

* Ezra vii. 14. † Ezra vii. 23.

heart as to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem." * This, then, was a Divine movement. It can only be accounted for by ascribing the original impulse to God. Natural motives of policy or of superstition may have been providentially manipulated, but the hand that used them was the hand of God. The man who can perceive this immense fact at the very outset of his career is fit for any enterprise. His transcendent faith will carry him through difficulties that would be insuperable to the worldly schemer.

Passing from the thought of the Divine influence on Artaxerxes, Ezra further praises God because he has himself received "mercy . . . before the king and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes." † This personal thanksgiving is evidently called forth by the scribe's consideration of the part assigned to him in the royal edict. There was enough in that edict to make the head of a self-seeking, ambitious man swim with vanity. But we can see from the first that Ezra is of a higher character. The burning passion that consumes him has not a particle of hunger for self-aggrandisement; it is wholly generated by devotion to the law of his God. In the narrowness and bigotry that characterise his later conduct as a reformer, some may suspect the action of that subtle self-will which creeps unawares into the conduct of some of the noblest men. Still the last thing that Ezra seeks, and the last thing that he cares for when it is thrust upon him, is the glory of earthly greatness.

Ezra's aim in leading the expedition may be gathered from the reflection of it in the royal edict, since that edict was doubtless drawn up with the express purpose

* Ezra vii. 27. † Ezra vii. 28.

of furthering the project of the favoured Jew. Ezra puts the beautifying of the temple in the front of his grateful words of praise to God. But the personal commission entrusted to Ezra goes much further. The decree significantly recognises the fact that he is to carry up to Jerusalem a copy of the Sacred Law. It refers to "the law of thy God which is in thine hand." * We shall hear more of this hereafter. Meanwhile it is important to see that the law, obedience to which Ezra is empowered to exact, is to be conveyed by him to Jerusalem. Thus he is both to introduce it to the notice of the people, and to see that it does not remain a dead letter among them. He is to teach it to those who do not know it.† At the same time these people are distinctly separated from others, who are expressly described as "all such as know the laws of thy God."‡ This plainly implies that both the Jerusalem Jews, and those west of the Euphrates generally, were not all of them ignorant of the Divine Torah. Some of them, at all events, knew the laws they were to be made to obey. Still they may not have possessed them in any written form. The plural term "laws" is here used, while the written compilation which Ezra carried up with him is described in the singular as "The Law." Ezra, then, having searched out The Law and tested it in his own experience, is now eager to take it up to Jerusalem, and get it executed among his fellow-countrymen at the religious metropolis as well as among the scattered Jews of the provincial districts. His great purpose is to make what he believes to be the will of God known, and to see that it is obeyed.

* Ezra vii. 14. † Ezra vii. 25.

‡ *Ibid.*

The very idea of a Torah implies a Divine will in religion. It presses upon our notice the often-forgotten fact that God has something to say to us about our conduct, that when we are serving Him it is not enough to be zealous, that we must also be obedient. Obedience is the keynote of Judaism. It is not less prominent in Christianity. The only difference is that Christians are freed from the shackles of a literal law in order that they may carry out "the law of liberty," by doing the will of God from the heart as loyal disciples of Jesus Christ, so that for us, as for the Jews, obedience is the most fundamental fact of religion. We can walk by faith in the freedom of sons; but that implies that we have "the obedience of faith." The ruling principle of our Lord's life is expressed in the words "I delight to do Thy will, O My God," and this must be the ruling principle in the life of every true Christian.

Equipped with a royal edict, provided with rich contributions, inspired with a great religious purpose, confident that the hand of his God was upon him, Ezra collected his volunteers, and proceeded to carry out his commission with all practicable speed. In his record of the journey, he first sets down a list of the families that accompanied him. It is interesting to notice names that had occurred in the earlier list of the followers of Zerubbabel, showing that some of the descendants of those who refused to go on the first expedition took part in the second. They remind us of Christiana and her children, who would not join the Pilgrim when he set out from the City of Destruction, but who subsequently followed in his footsteps.

But there was little at Jerusalem to attract a new expedition; for the glamour which had surrounded the

first return, with a son of David at its head, had faded in grievous disappointments; and the second series of pilgrims had to carry with them the torch with which to rekindle the flames of devotion.

Ezra states that when he had marshalled his forces he spent three days with them by a river called the "Ahava," apparently because it flowed by a town of that name. The exact site of the camp cannot be determined, although it could not have been far from Babylon, and the river must have been either one of the tributaries of the Euphrates or a canal cut through its alluvial plain. The only plausible conjecture of a definite site settles upon a place now known as *Hit*, in the neighbourhood of some bitumen springs; and the interest of this place may be found in the fact that here the usual caravan route leaves the fertile Valley of the Euphrates and plunges into the waterless desert. Even if Ezra decided to avoid the difficult desert track, and to take his heavy caravan round through Northern Syria by way of Aleppo and the Valley of the Orontes—an extended journey which would account for the three months spent on the road—it would still be natural for him to pause at the parting of the ways and review the gathered host. One result of this review was the startling discovery that there were no Levites in the whole company. We were struck with the fact that but a very small and disproportionate number of these officials accompanied the earlier pilgrimage of Zerubbabel, and we saw the probable explanation in the disappointment if not the disaffection of the Levites at their degradation by Ezekiel. The more rigid arrangement of Ezra's edition of The Law, which gave them a definite and permanent place in a second rank, below the priesthood, was not likely to encourage them to volunteer for

the new expedition. Nothing is more difficult than self-effacement even in the service of God.

There was a community of Levites at a place called Casiphia,* under the direction of a leader named Iddo. It would be interesting to think that this community was really a sort of Levitical college, a school of students of the Torah; but we have no data to go upon in forming an opinion. One thing is certain. We cannot suppose that the new edition of The Law had been drawn up in this community of the Levites, because Ezra had started with it in his hand as the charter of his great enterprise; nor, indeed, in any other Levitical college, because it was not at all according to the mind of the Levites.

After completing his company by the addition of the Levites, Ezra made a solemn religious preparation for his journey. Like the Israelites after the defeat at Gibeah in their retributive war with Benjamin; † like the penitent people at Mizpeh, in the days of Samuel, when they put away their idols; ‡ like Jehoshaphat and his subjects when rumours of a threatened invasion filled them with apprehension,§—Ezra and his followers fasted and humbled themselves before God in view of their hazardous undertaking. The fasting was a natural sign of the humiliation, and this prostration before God was at once a confession of sin and an admission of absolute dependence on His mercy. Thus the people reveal themselves as the "poor in spirit" to whom our Lord directs His first beatitude. They are those who

* The site of this town has not been identified. It could not have been far from Ahava.

† Judges xx. 26.

‡ 1 Sam. vii. 6.

§ 2 Chron. xx. 3.

humble themselves, and therefore those whom God will exalt.

We must not confound this state of self-humiliation before God with the totally different condition of abject fear which shrinks from danger in contemptible cowardice. The very opposite to that is the attitude of these humble pilgrims. Like the Puritan soldiers who became bold as lions before man in the day of battle, just because they had spent the night in fasting and tears and self-abasement before God, Ezra and his people rose from their penitential fast, calmly prepared to face all dangers in the invincible might of God. There seems to have been some enemy whom Ezra knew to be threatening his path, for when he got safely to the end of his journey he gave thanks for God's protection from this foe; * and, in any case, so wealthy a caravan as his was would provoke the cupidity of the roving hordes of Bedouin that infested the Syrian wastes. Ezra's first thought was to ask for an escort; but he tells us that he was ashamed to do so, as this would imply distrust in God.† Whatever we may think of his logic, we must be struck by his splendid faith, and the loyalty which would run a great risk rather than suffer what might seem like dishonour to his God. Here was one of God's heroes. We cannot but connect the preliminary fast with this courageous attitude of Ezra's. So in tales of chivalry we read how knights were braced by prayer and fast and vigil to enter the most terrible conflicts with talismans of victory. In an age of rushing activity it is hard to find the hidden springs of strength in their calm retreats. The glare of publicity starts us on the

* Ezra viii. 31. † Ezra viii. 22.

wrong track, by tempting us to advertise our own excellences, instead of abasing ourselves in the dust before God. Yet is it not now as true as ever that no boasted might of man can be in any way comparable to the Divine strength which takes possession of those who completely surrender their wills to God? Happy are they who have the grace to walk in the valley of humiliation, for this leads to the armoury of supernatural power!

CHAPTER XII.

FOREIGN MARRIAGES.

Ezra ix.

THE successful issue of Ezra's undertaking was speedily followed by a bitter disappointment on the part of its leader, the experience of which urged him to make a drastic reformation that rent many a happy home asunder and filled Jerusalem with the grief of broken hearts.

During the obscure period that followed the dedication of the temple—a period of which we have no historical remains—the rigorous exclusiveness which had marked the conduct of the returned exiles when they had rudely rejected the proposal of their Gentile neighbours to assist them in rebuilding the temple was abandoned, and freedom of intercourse went so far as to permit intermarriage with the descendants of the Canaanite aborigines and the heathen population of neighbouring nations. Ezra gives a list of tribal names closely resembling the lists preserved in the history of early ages, when the Hebrews first contemplated taking possession of the promised land;* but it cannot be imagined that the ancient tribes preserved their independent names and separate existence as late as the

* Ezra ix. 1.

time of the return—though the presence of the gypsies as a distinct people in England to-day shows that racial distinction may be kept up for ages in a mixed society. It is more probable that the list is literary, that the names are reminiscences of the tribes as they were known in ancient traditions. In addition to these old inhabitants of Canaan, there are Ammonites and Moabites from across the Jordan, Egyptians, and, lastly, most significantly separate from the Canaanite tribes, those strange folk, the Amorites, who are discovered by recent ethnological research to be of a totally different stock from that of the Canaanite tribes, probably allied to a light-coloured people that can be traced along the Libyan border, and possibly even of Aryan origin. From all these races the Jews had taken them wives. So wide was the gate flung open!

This freedom of intermarriage may be viewed as a sign of general laxity and indifference on the part of the citizens of Jerusalem, and so Ezra seems to have regarded it. But it would be a mistake to suppose that there was no serious purpose associated with it, by means of which grave and patriotic men attempted to justify the practice. It was a question whether the policy of exclusiveness had succeeded. The temple had been built, it is true; and a city had risen among the ruins of ancient Jerusalem. But poverty, oppression, hardship, and disappointment had settled down on the little Judæan community, which now found itself far worse off than the captives in Babylon. Feeble and isolated, the Jews were quite unable to resist the attacks of their jealous neighbours. Would it not be better to come to terms with them, and from enemies convert them into allies? Then the policy of exclusiveness involved

commercial ruin; and men who knew how their brethren in Chaldæa were enriching themselves by trade with the heathen, were galled by a yoke which held them back from foreign intercourse. It would seem to be advisable, on social as well as on political grounds, that a new and more liberal course should be pursued, if the wretched garrison was not to be starved out. Leading aristocratic families were foremost in contracting the foreign alliances. It is such as they who would profit most, as it is such as they who would be most tempted to consider worldly motives and to forgo the austerity of their fathers. There does not seem to have been any one recognised head of the community after Zerubbabel; the "princes" constituted a sort of informal oligarchy. Some of these princes had taken foreign wives. Priests and Levites had also followed the same course. It is a historical fact that the party of rigour is not generally the official party. In the days of our Lord the priests and rulers were mostly Sadducean, while the Pharisees were men of the people. The English Puritans were not of the Court party. But in the case before us the leaders of the people were divided. While we do not meet any priests among the purists, some of the princes disapproved of the laxity of their neighbours, and exposed it to Ezra.

Ezra was amazed, appalled. In the dramatic style which is quite natural to an Oriental, he rent both his tunic and his outer mantle, and he tore his hair and his long priestly beard. This expressed more than the grief of mourning which is shown by tearing one garment and cutting the hair. Like the high-priest when he ostentatiously rent his clothes at what he wished to be regarded as blasphemy in the words of Jesus, Ezra showed indignation and rage by his violent

action. It was a sign of his startled and horrified emotions; but no doubt it was also intended to produce an impression on the people who gathered in awe to watch the great ambassador, as he sat amazed and silent on the temple pavement through the long hours of the autumn afternoon.

The grounds of Ezra's grief and anger may be learnt from the remarkable prayer which he poured out when the stir occasioned by the preparation of the vesper ceremonies roused him, and when the ascending smoke of the evening sacrifice would naturally suggest to him an occasion for drawing near to God. Welling up, hot and passionate, his prayer is a revelation of the very heart of the scribe. Ezra shows us what true prayer is—that it is laying bare the heart and soul in the presence of God. The striking characteristic of this outburst of Ezra's is that it does not contain a single petition. There is no greater mistake in regard to prayer than the notion that it is nothing more than the begging of specific favours from the bounty of the Almighty. That is but a shallow kind of prayer at best. In the deepest and most real prayer the soul is too near to God to ask for any definite thing; it is just unbosoming itself to the Great Confidant, just telling out its agony to the Father who can understand everything and receive the whole burden of the anguished spirit.

Considering this prayer more in detail, we may notice, in the first place, that Ezra comes out as a true priest, not indeed officiating at the altar with ceremonial sacrifices, but identifying himself with the people he represents, so that he takes to his own breast the shame of what he regards as the sin of his people. Prostrate with self-humiliation, he cries, "O

my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God,"* and he speaks of the sins which have just been made known to him as though he had a share in them, calling them "*our* iniquities" and "*our* trespass."† Have we not here a glimpse into that mystery of vicarious sin-bearing which is consummated in the great intercession and sacrifice of our Lord? Though himself a sinful man, and therefore at heart sharing the guilt of his people by personal participation in it, as the holy Jesus could not do, still in regard to the particular offence which he is now deploring, Ezra is as innocent as an unfallen angel. Yet he blushes for shame, and lies prostrate with confusion of face. He is such a true patriot that he completely identifies himself with his people. But in proportion as such an identification is felt, there must be an involuntary sense of the sharing of guilt. It is vain to call it an illusion of the imagination. Before the bar of strict justice Ezra was as innocent of this one sin, as before the same bar Christ was innocent of all sin. God could not really disapprove of him for it, any more than He could look with disfavour on the great Sin-bearer. But subjectively, in his own experience, Ezra did not feel less poignant pangs of remorse than he would have felt if he had been himself personally guilty. This perfect sympathy of true priesthood is rarely experienced; but since Christians are called to be priests, to make intercession, and to bear one another's burdens, something approaching it must be shared by all the followers of Christ; they who would go forth as saviours of their brethren must feel it acutely. The sin-bearing sacrifice

* Ezra ix. 6. † *Ibid.*

of Christ stands alone in its perfect efficacy, and many mysteries crowd about it that cannot be explained by any human analogies. Still here and there we come across faint likenesses in the higher experiences of the better men, enough to suggest that our Lord's passion was not a prodigy, that it was really in harmony with the laws by which God governs the moral universe.

In thus confessing the sin of the people before God, but in language which the people who shared with him a reverence for The Law could hear, no doubt Ezra hoped to move them also to share in his feelings of shame and abhorrence for the practices he was deploring. He came dangerously near to the fatal mistake of preaching through a prayer, by "praying at" the congregation. He was evidently too deeply moved to be guilty of an insincerity, a piece of profanity, at which every devout soul must revolt. Nevertheless the very exercise of public prayer—prayer uttered audibly, and conducted by the leader of a congregation —means that this is to be an inducement for the people to join in the worship. The officiating minister is not merely to pray before the congregation, while the people kneel as silent auditors. His prayer is designed to guide and help their prayers, so that there may be "common prayer" throughout the whole assembly. In this way it may be possible for him to influence men and women by praying with them, as he can never do by directly preaching to them. The essential point is that the prayer must first of all be real on the part of the leader—that he must be truly addressing God, and then that his intention with regard to the people must be not to exhort them through his prayer, but simply to induce them to join him in it.

Let us now inquire what was the nature of the sin

which so grievously distressed Ezra, and which he regarded as so heavy a slur on the character of his people in the sight of God. On the surface of it, there was just a question of policy. Some have argued that the party of rigour was mistaken, that its course was suicidal, that the only way of preserving the little colony was by means of well-adjusted alliances with its neighbours—a low view of the question which Ezra would not have glanced at for a moment, because with his supreme faith in God no consideration of worldly expediency or political diplomacy could be allowed to deflect him from the path indicated, as he thought, by the Divine will. But a higher line of opposition has been taken. It has been said that Ezra was illiberal, uncharitable, culpably narrow, and heartlessly harsh. That the man who could pour forth such a prayer as this, every sentence of which throbs with emotion, every word of which tingles with intense feeling—that this man was heartless cannot be believed. Still it may be urged that Ezra took a very different view from that suggested by the genial outlook across the nations which we meet in Isaiah. The lovely idyll of Ruth defends the course he condemned so unsparingly. The Book of Jonah was written directly in rebuke of one form of Jewish exclusiveness. Ezra was going even further than the Book of Deuteronomy, which had allowed marriages with the heathen,* and had laid down definite marriage laws in regard to foreign connections.† It cannot be maintained that all the races named by Ezra were excluded. Could it be just to condemn the Jews for not having followed the later and more exacting edition of The Law, which Ezra had

* Deut. xxi. 13. † Deut. xxiii. 1-8.

only just brought up with him, and which had not been known by the offenders?

In trying to answer these questions, we must start from one clear fact. Ezra is not merely guided by a certain view of policy. He may be mistaken, but he is deeply conscientious, his motive is intensely religious. Whether rightly or wrongly, he is quite persuaded that the social condition at which he is so grievously shocked is directly opposed to the known will of God. "We have forsaken Thy commandments," he exclaims. But what commandments, we may ask, seeing that the people of Jerusalem did not possess a law that went so far as Ezra was requiring of them? His own language here comes in most appositely. Ezra does not appeal to Deuteronomy, though he may have had a passage from that book in mind,* neither does he produce the Law Book which he has brought up with him from Babylon and to which reference is made in our version of the decree of Artaxerxes;† but he turns to the prophets, not with reference to any of their specific utterances, but in the most general way, implying that his view is derived from the broad stream of prophecy in its whole course and character. In his prayer he describes the broken commandments as "those which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets." This is the more remarkable because the prophets did not favour the scrupulous observance of external rules, but dwelt on great principles of righteousness. Some of them took the liberal side, and expressed decidedly cosmopolitan ideas in regard to foreign nations, as Ezra must have been aware. He may have mentally anticipated the excuses which would be urged in

* Deut. vii. 3. † Ezra vii. 14.

reliance on isolated utterances of this character. Still, on a survey of the whole course of prophecy, he is persuaded that it is opposed to the practices which he condemns. He throws his conclusion into a definite sentence, after the manner of a verbal quotation,* but this is only in accordance with the vivid, dramatic style of Semitic literature, and what he really means is that the spirit of his national prophecy and the principles laid down by the recognised prophets support him in the position which he has taken up. These prophets fought against all corrupt practices, and in particular they waged ceaseless war with the introduction of heathenish manners to the religious and social life of Israel. It is here that Ezra finds them to be powerful allies in his stern reformation. They furnish him, so to speak, with his major premiss, and that is indisputable. His weak place is in his minor premiss, viz., in the notion that intermarriage with Gentile neighbours necessarily involves the introduction of corrupt heathenish habits. This he quietly assumes. But there is much to be said for his position, especially when we note that he is not now concerned with the Samaritans, with whom the temple-builders came into contact and who accepted some measure of the Jewish faith, but in some cases with known idolaters—the Egyptians for instance. The complex social and moral problems which surround the quarrel on which Ezra here embarks will come before us more fully as we proceed. At present it may suffice for us to see that Ezra rests his action on his conception of the main characteristics of the teaching of the prophets.

Further, his reading of history comes to his aid.

* Ezra ix. 11.

He perceives that it was the adoption of heathenish practices that necessitated the severe chastisement of the captivity. God had only spared a small remnant of the guilty people. But He had been very gracious to that remnant, giving them "a nail in His holy place"; * *i.e.*, a fixture in the restored sanctuary, though as yet, as it were, but at one small point, because so few had returned to enjoy the privileges of the sacred temple worship. Now even this nail might be drawn. Will the escaped remnant be so foolish as to imitate the sins of their forefathers, and risk the slight hold which they have as yet obtained in the renewed centre of Divine favour? So to repudiate the lessons of the captivity, which should have been branded irrevocably by the hot irons of its cruel hardships, what was this but a sign of the most desperate depravity? Ezra could see no hope even of a remnant escaping from the wrath which would consume the people who were guilty of such wilful, such open-eyed apostasy.

In the concluding sentences of his prayer Ezra appeals to the righteousness of God, who had permitted the remnant to escape at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, saying, "O Lord, the God of Israel, Thou art righteous; for we are left a remnant that is escaped, as it is this day." † Some have supposed that God's righteousness here stands for His goodness, and that Ezra really means the mercy which spared the remnant. But this interpretation is contrary to usage, and quite opposed to the spirit of the prayer. Ezra has referred to the mercy of God earlier, but in his final sentences he has another thought in mind. The prayer ends in gloom

* Ezra ix. 8. † Ezra ix. 15.

and despondency—"behold, we are before Thee in our guiltiness; for none can stand before Thee because of this."* The righteousness of God, then, is seen in the fact that *only* a remnant was spared. Ezra does not plead for the pardon of the guilty people, as Moses did in his famous prayer of intercession.† As yet they are not conscious of their sin. To forgive them before they have owned their guilt would be immoral. The first condition of pardon is confession. "*If we confess* our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." ‡ Then, indeed, the very righteousness of God favours the pardon of the sinner. But till this state of contrition is reached, not only can there be no thought of forgiveness, but the sternest, darkest thoughts of sin are most right and fitting. Ezra is far too much in earnest simply to wish to help his people to escape from the consequences of their conduct. This would not be salvation. It would be moral shipwreck. The great need is to be saved from the evil conduct itself. It is to this end that the very passion of his soul is directed. Here we perceive the spirit of the true reformer. But the evangelist cannot afford to dispense with something of the same spirit, although he can add the gracious encouragements of a gospel; for the only true gospel promises deliverance from sin itself in the first instance as from the greatest of all evils, and deliverance from no other evil except on condition of freedom from this.

* Ezra ix. 15. † Exod. xxxii. 31, 32. ‡ 1 John i. 9.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOME SACRIFICED TO THE CHURCH.

Ezra x.

EZRA'S narrative, written in the first person, ceases with his prayer, the conclusion of which brings us to the end of the ninth chapter of our Book of Ezra; at the tenth chapter the chronicler resumes his story, describing, however, the events which immediately follow. His writing is here as graphic as Ezra's, and if it is not taken from notes left by the scribe, at all events it would seem to be drawn from the report of another eye-witness; for it describes most remarkable scenes with a vividness that brings them before the mind's eye, so that the reader cannot study them even at this late day without a pang of sympathy.

Ezra's prayer and confession, his grievous weeping and prostrate humiliation before God, deeply affected the spectators; and as the news spread through the city, a very great congregation of men, women, and children assembled together to gaze at the strange spectacle. They could not gaze unmoved. Deep emotion is contagious. The man who is himself profoundly convinced and intensely concerned with his religious ideas will certainly win disciples. Where the soundest arguments have failed to persuade, a single note of sincere faith often strikes home. It is the passion of the orator that

rouses the multitude, and even where there is no oratory the passion of true feeling pleads with irresistible eloquence. Ezra had not to speak a word to the people. What he was, what he felt, his agony of shame, his agony of prayer—all this melted them to tears, and a cry of lamentation went up from the gathered multitudes in the temple courts. Their grief was more than a sentimental reflection of the scribe's distress, for the Jews could see plainly that it was for them and for their miserable condition that this ambassador from the Persian court was mourning so piteously. His sorrow was wholly vicarious. By no calamity or offence of his own, but simply by what he regarded as their wretched fall, Ezra was now plunged into heart-broken agony. Such a result of their conduct could not but excite the keenest self-reproaches in the breasts of all who in any degree shared his view of the situation. Then the only path of amendment visible before them was one that involved the violent rupture of home ties; the cruel severance of husband and wife, of parent and child; the complete sacrifice of human love on what appeared to be the altar of duty to God. It was indeed a bitter hour for the Jews who felt themselves to be offenders, and for their innocent wives and children who would be involved in any attempted reformation.

The confusion was arrested by the voice of one man, a layman named Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, who came to the assistance of Ezra as a volunteer spokesman of the people. This man entirely surrendered to Ezra's view, making a frank and unreserved confession of his own and the people's sin. So far then Ezra has won his point. He has begun to gain assent from among the offenders. Shecaniah adds to his confession a sentence of some ambiguity, saying, "Yet now there is

hope for Israel concerning this thing." * This might be thought to mean that God was merciful, and that there was hope in the penitent attitude of the congregation that He would take pity on the people and not deal hardly with them. But the similarity of the phraseology to the words of the last verse of the previous chapter, where the expression "because of this" † plainly points to the offence as the one thing in view, shows that the allusion here is to that offence, and not to the more recent signs of penitence. Shecaniah means, then, that there is hope concerning this matter of the foreign marriages—viz., that they may be rooted out of Israel. The hope is for a reformation, not for any condoning of the offence. It means despair to the unhappy wives, the end of all home peace and joy in many a household—a lurid hope surely, and hardly worthy of the name except on the lips of a fanatic. Shecaniah now proceeds to make a definite proposal. He would have the people enter into a solemn covenant with God. They are not only to undergo a great domestic reformation, but they are to take a vow in the sight of God that they will carry it through. Shecaniah shows the unreflecting zeal of a raw convert; an officious person, a meddler, he is too bold and forward for one whose place is the penitent's bench. The covenant is to pledge the people to divorce their foreign wives. Yet the unfeeling man will not soften his proposal by any euphemism, nor will he hide its more odious features. He deliberately adds that the children should be sent away with their mothers. The nests are to be cleared of the whole brood.

Ezra had not ventured to draw out such a direful

* Ezra x. 2. † Ezra ix. 15.

programme. But Shecaniah says that this is "according to the counsel of my lord," * using terms of unwonted obsequiousness—unless, as seems less likely, the phrase is meant to apply to God, *i.e.*, to be read, "According to the counsel of *The Lord*." Shecaniah evidently gathered the unexpressed opinion of Ezra from the language of his prayer and from his general attitude. This was the only way out of the difficulty, the logical conclusion from what was now admitted. Ezra saw it clearly enough, but it wanted a man of coarser fibre to say it. Shecaniah goes further, and claims the concurrence of all who "tremble at the words of the God of Israel." These people have been mentioned before as forming the nucleus of the congregation that gathered about Ezra.† Then this outspoken man distinctly claims the authority of The Law for his proposition. Ezra had based his view of the heathen marriages on the general character of the teaching of the prophets; Shecaniah now appeals to The Law as the authority for his scheme of wholesale divorce. This is a huge assumption of what has never been demonstrated. But such people as Shecaniah do not wait for niceties of proof before making their sweeping proposals.

The bold adviser followed up his suggestion by rallying Ezra and calling upon him to "be of good courage," seeing that he would have supporters in the great reformation. Falling in with the proposed scheme, Ezra there and then extracted an oath from the people —both clergy and laity—that they would execute it. This was a general resolution. Some time was required and many difficulties had to be faced before it could

* Ezra x. 3.

† Ezra ix. 4.

be carried into practice, and meanwhile Ezra withdrew into retirement, still fasting and mourning.

We must now allow for an interval of some months. The chronological arrangement seems to have been as follows. Ezra and his company left Babylon in the spring, as Zerubbabel had done before him—at the same season as that of the great exodus from Egypt under Moses. Each of these three great expeditions began with the opening of the natural year, in scenes of bright beauty and hopefulness. Occupying four months on his journey, Ezra reached Jerusalem in the heat of July. It could not have been very long after his arrival that the news of the foreign marriages was brought to him by the princes, because if he had spent any considerable time in Jerusalem first he must have found out the state of affairs for himself. But now we are transported to the month of December for the meeting of the people when the covenant of divorce is to be put in force. Possibly some of the powerful leaders had opposed the summoning of such a gathering, and their hindrance may have delayed it; or it may have taken Ezra and his counsellors some time to mature their plans. Long brooding over the question could not have lessened the scribe's estimate of its gravity. But the suggestion of all kinds of difficulties and the clear perception of the terrible results which must flow from the contemplated reformation did not touch his opinion of what was right, or his decision, once reached, that there must be a clearing away of the foreign elements, root and branch, although they had entwined their tendrils about the deepest affections of the people. The seclusion and mourning of Ezra is recorded in Ezra x. 6. The next verse carries us on to the preparation for the dreadful assembly, which, as we must conclude, really

took place some months later. The summons was backed up by threats of confiscation and excommunication. To this extent the great powers entrusted to Ezra by the king of Persia were employed. It looks as if the order was the issue of a conflict of counsels in which that of Ezra was victorious, for it was exceedingly peremptory in tone and it only gave three days' notice. The people came, as they were bound to do, for the authority of the supreme government was behind the summons; but they resented the haste with which they had been called together, and they pleaded the inconvenience of the season for an open-air meeting. They met in the midst of the winter rains; cold and wet they crouched in the temple courts, the picture of wretchedness. In a hot, dry country so little provision is made for inclement weather, that when it comes the people suffer from it most acutely, so that it means much more distress to them than to the inhabitants of a chill and rainy climate. Still it may seem strange that, with so terrible a question as the complete break-up of their homes presented to them, the Jews should have taken much account of the mere weather even at its worst. History, however, does not shape itself according to proportionate proprieties, but after the course of very human facts. We are often unduly influenced by present circumstances, so that what is small in itself, and in comparison with the supreme interests of life, may become for the moment of the most pressing importance, just because it is present and making itself felt as the nearest fact. Moreover, there is a sort of magnetic connection between the external character of things and the most intangible of internal experiences. The "November gloom" is more than a meteorological fact; it has its psychological aspect. After all, are we

not citizens of the great physical universe? and is it not therefore reasonable that the various phases of nature should affect us in some degree, so that the common topic of conversation, "the weather," may really be of more serious concern than we suspect? Be that as it may, it is clear that while these Jews, who usually enjoyed brilliant sunshine and the fair blue Syrian sky, were shivering in the chill December rains, wet and miserable, they were quite unable to discuss a great social question, or to brace themselves up for an act of supreme renunciation. It was a season of depression, and the people felt limp and heartless, as people often do feel at such a season. They pleaded for delay. Not only was the weather a great hindrance to calm deliberation, but, as they said, the proposed reformation was of a widespread character. It must be an affair of some time. Let it be regularly organised. Let it be conducted only before appointed courts in the several cities. This was reasonable enough, and accordingly it was decided to adopt the suggestion. It is easy to be a reformer in theory; but they who have faced a great abuse in practice know how difficult it is to uproot it. This is especially true of all attempts to affect the social order. Wild ideas are floated without an effort. But the execution of these ideas means far more toil and battle, and involves a much greater tumult in the world, than the airy dreamers who start them so confidently and who are so surprised at the slowness of dull people to accept them ever imagine.

Not only was there a successful plea for delay. There was also direct opposition to Ezra's stern proposal —although this did not prove to be successful. The indication of opposition is obscured by the imperfect rendering of the Authorised Version. Turning to the

more correct translation in the Revised Version we read, "Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah stood up against this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them."* Here was a little knot of champions of the poor threatened wives, defenders of the peaceful homes so soon to be smitten by the ruthless axe of the reformer, men who believed in the sanctity of domestic life as not less real than the sanctity of ecclesiastical arrangements, men perhaps to whom love was as Divine as law, nay, was law, wherever it was pure and true.

This opposition was borne down; the courts sat; the divorces were granted; wives were torn from their husbands and sent back to their indignant parents; and children were orphaned. Priests, Levites, and other temple officers did not escape the domestic reformation; the common people were not beneath its searching scrutiny; everywhere the pruning knife lopped off the alien branches from the vine of Israel. After giving a list of families involved, the chronicler concludes with the bare remark that men put away wives *with children* as well as those who had no children.† It is baldly stated. What did it mean? The agony of separation, the lifelong division of the family, the wife worse than widowed, the children driven from the shelter of the home, the husband sitting desolate in his silent house —over all this the chronicler draws a veil; but our imaginations can picture such scenes as might furnish materials for the most pathetic tragedies.

In order to mitigate the misery of this social revolution, attention has been called to the freedom of divorce which was allowed among the Jews and to the inferior

* Ezra x. 15. † Ezra x. 44.

status assigned to women in the East. The wife, it is said, was always prepared to receive a bill of divorce whenever her husband found occasion to dismiss her: she would have a right to claim back her dowry; and she would return to her father's house without the slightest slur upon her character. All this may be true enough; and yet human nature is the same all the world over, and where there is the strong mutual affection of true wedded love, whether in the England of our Christian era or in the Palestine of the olden times, to sever the tie of union must mean the agony of torn hearts, the despair of blighted lives. And was this necessary? Even if it was not according to the ordinance of their religion for Jews to contract marriages with foreigners, having contracted such marriages and having seen children grow up about them, was it not a worse evil for them to break the bonds by violence and scatter the families? Is not the marriage law itself holy? Nay, has it not a prior right over against Levitical institutions or prophetic ordinances, seeing that it may be traced back to the sweet sanctities of Eden? What if the stern reformer had fallen into a dreadful blunder? Might it not be that this new Hildebrand and his fanatical followers were even guilty of a huge crime in their quixotic attempt to purge the Church by wrecking the home?

Assuredly from our point of view and with our Christian light no such conduct as theirs could be condoned. It was utterly undiscriminating, riding roughshod over the tenderest claims. Gentile wives such as Ruth the Moabitess might have adopted the faith of their husbands—doubtless in many cases they had done so—yet the sweeping, pitiless mandate of separation applied to them as surely as if they had been

heathen sorceresses. On the other hand, we must use some historical imagination in estimating these sorrowful scenes. The great idea of Ezra was to preserve a separate people. He held that this was essential to the maintenance of pure religion and morals in the midst of the pagan abominations which surrounded the little colony. Church separation seemed to be bound up with race separation. This Ezra believed to be after the mind of the prophets, and therefore a truth of Divine inspiration. Under all the circumstances it is not easy to say that his main contention was wrong, that Israel could have been preserved as a Church if it had ceased to keep itself separate as a race, or that without Church exclusiveness religious purity could have been maintained.

We are not called upon to face any such terrible problem, although St. Paul's warning against Christians becoming "unequally yoked with unbelievers"* reminds us that the worst ill-assortment in marriage should not be thought of as only concerned with diversity of rank, wealth, or culture; that they are most ill-matched who have not common interests in the deepest concerns of the soul. Then, too, it needs to be remembered in these days, when ease and comfort are unduly prized, that there are occasions on which even the peace and love of the home must be sacrificed to the supreme claims of God. Our Lord ominously warned His disciples that He would send a sword to sever the closest domestic ties—"to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother," etc.,† and He added, "He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me."‡ In

* 2 Cor. vi. 14. † Matt. x. 35. ‡ Matt. x. 37

times of early Christian persecution it was necessary to choose between the cross of Christ and the nearest domestic claims, and then faithful martyrs accepted the cross even at the cost of the dear love of home and all its priceless jewels, as, for instance, in the familiar story of Perpetua and Felicitas. The same choice had to be made again under Catholic persecution among the Huguenots, as we are reminded by Millais' well-known picture, and even in a quasi-protestant persecution in the case of Sir Thomas More. It faces the convert from Hindooism in India to-day. Therefore whatever opinion we may form of the particular action of Ezra, we should do well to ponder gravely over the grand principle on which it was based. God must have the first place in the hearts and lives of His people, even though in some cases this may involve the shipwreck of the dearest earthly affections.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COST OF AN IDEALIST'S SUCCESS.

Ezra iv. 6-23.

THE fourth chapter of the Book of Ezra contains an account of a correspondence between the Samaritan colonists and two kings of Persia, which follows sharply on the first mention of the intrigues of "the enemies of Judah and Benjamin" at the Persian court in the later days of Cyrus, and which precedes the description of the fortunes of the Jews in the reign of Darius. If this has its right chronological position in the narrative, it must relate to the interval during which the temple-building was in abeyance. In that case the two kings of Persia would be Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus, and Pseudo-Bardes. But the names in the text are Ahasuerus (*Ahashverosh*) and Artaxerxes (*Artahshashta*). It has been suggested that these are second names for the predecessors of Darius. Undoubtedly it was customary for Persian monarchs to have more than one name. But elsewhere in the Biblical narratives these two names are invariably applied to the successors of Darius—the first standing for the well-known Xerxes and the second for Artaxerxes Longimanus. The presumption therefore is that the same kings are designated by them here. Moreover, when we examine the account of the correspondence

with the Persian court, we find that this agrees best with the later period. The opening verses of the fourth chapter of Ezra deal with the building of the temple; the last verse of that chapter and the succeeding narrative of the fifth chapter resume the same topic. But the correspondence relates to the building of *the walls of the city*. There is not a word about any such work in the context. Then in the letter addressed to Artaxerxes the writers describe the builders of the walls as "the Jews *which came up from thee*." * This description would not fit Zerubbabel and his followers, who migrated under Cyrus. But it would apply to those who accompanied Ezra to Jerusalem in the reign of Artaxerxes. Lastly, the reign of Pseudo-Bardes is too brief for all that would have to be crowded into it. It only occupied seven months. Yet a letter is sent up from the enemies of the Jews; inquiry is made into the history of Jerusalem by Persian officials at the court; a reply based on this inquiry is transmitted to Palestine; in consequence of this reply an expedition is organised which effectually stops the works at Jerusalem, but only after the exercise of force on the spot. It is nearly impossible for all this to have happened in so short a time as seven months. All the indications therefore concur to assign the correspondence to the later period.

The chronicler must have inserted this section out of its order for some reason of his own. Probably he desired to accentuate the impression of the malignant and persistent enmity of the colonists, and with this end in view described the later acts of antagonism directly after mentioning the first outbreak of opposition. It

* Ezra iv. 12.

is just possible that he perceived the unfavourable character of his picture of the Jews in their curt refusal of assistance from their neighbours, and that he desired to balance this by an accumulation of weighty indictments against the people whom the Jews had treated so ungraciously.

In his account of the correspondence with the Persian court the chronicler seems to have taken note of three separate letters from the unfriendly colonists. First, he tells us that in the beginning of the reign of Ahasuerus they wrote an accusation against the Jews.* This was before the mission of Ezra; therefore it was a continuance of the old opposition that had been seen in the intrigues that preceded the reign of Darius; it shows that after the death of that friendly monarch the slumbering fires broke out afresh. Next, he names certain men who wrote to Artaxerxes, and he adds that their letter was translated and written in the Aramaic language—the language which was the common medium of intercourse in trade and official affairs among the mixed races inhabiting Syria and all the regions west of the Euphrates.† The reference to this language probably arises from the fact that the chronicler had seen a copy of the translation. He does not tell us anything either of the nationality of the writers or of the subject of their letter. It has been suggested that they were Jews in Jerusalem who wrote to plead their cause with the Persian king. The fact that two of them bore Persian names—viz., Bishlam and Mithredath—does not present a serious difficulty to this view, as we know that some Jews received such names, Zerubbabel, for example, being named Sheshbazzar. But as

* Ezra iv. 6. † Ezra iv. 7.

the previous passage refers to an accusation against the Jews, and as the following sentences give an account of a letter also written by the inimical colonists, it is scarcely likely that the intermediate colourless verse which mentions the letter of Bishlam and his companions is of a different character. We should expect some more explicit statement if that were the case. Moreover, it is most improbable that the passage which follows would begin abruptly without an adversative conjunction—as is the case—if it proceeded to describe a letter provoked by opposition to another letter just mentioned. Therefore we must regard Bishlam and his companions as enemies of the Jews. Now some who have accepted this view have maintained that the letter of Bishlam and his friends is no other than the letter ascribed to Rehum and Shimshai in the following verses. It is stated that the former letter was in the Aramaic language, and the letter which is ascribed to the two great officials is in that language. But the distinct statement that each group of men wrote a letter seems to imply that there were two letters written in the reign of Artaxerxes, or three in all.

The third letter is the only one that the chronicler has preserved. He gives it in the Aramaic language, and from Ezra iv. 8, where this is introduced, to vi. 18, his narrative proceeds in that language, probably because he found his materials in some Aramaic document.

Some have assigned this letter to the period of the reign of Artaxerxes prior to the mission of Ezra. But there are two reasons for thinking it must have been written after that mission. The first has been already referred to—viz., that the complaint about "the Jews which came up from thee" points to some large migra-

tion during the reign of Artaxerxes, which must be Ezra's expedition. The second reason arises from a comparison of the results of the correspondence with the description of Jerusalem in the opening of the Book of Nehemiah. The violence of the Samaritans recorded in Ezra iv. 23 will account for the deplorable state of Jerusalem mentioned in Nehemiah i. 3, the effects of the invasion referred to in the former passage agreeing well with the condition of the dismantled city reported to Nehemiah. But in the history of Ezra's expedition no reference is made to any such miserable state of affairs. Thus the correspondence must be assigned to the time between the close of "Ezra" and the beginning of "Nehemiah."

It is to Ezra's company, then, that the correspondence with Artaxerxes refers. There were two parties in Jerusalem, and the opposition was against the active reforming party, which now had the upper hand in the city. Immediately we consider this, the cause of the continuance and increase of the antagonism of the colonists becomes apparent. Ezra's harsh reformation in the expulsion of foreign wives must have struck the divorced women as a cruel and insulting outrage. Driven back to their paternal homes with their burning wrongs, these poor women must have roused the utmost indignation among their people. Thus the reformer had stirred up a hornets' nest. The legislator who ventures to interfere with the sacred privacy of domestic life excites the deepest passions, and a wise man will think twice before he meddles in so dangerous a business. Only the most imperative requirements of religion and righteousness can justify such a course, and even when it is justified nobody can foresee how far the trouble it brings may spread.

The letter which the chronicler transcribes seems to have been the most important of the three. It was written by two great Persian officials. In our English versions the first of these is called "the chancellor," and the second "the scribe." "The chancellor" was probably the governor of a large district, of which Palestine was but a provincial section; and "the scribe" his secretary. Accordingly it is apparent that the persistent enmity of the colonists, their misrepresentations, and perhaps their bribes, had resulted in instigating opposition to the Jews in very high places. The action of the Jews themselves may have excited suspicion in the mind of the Persian Satrap, for it would seem from his letter that they had just commenced to fortify their city. The names of the various peoples who are associated with these two great men in the title of the letter also show how far the opposition to the Jews had spread. They are given as the peoples whom Osnappar (*Esar-bani-pal*) had brought over and set in the city of Samaria, "*and in the rest of the country beyond the river.*"* That is to say, the settlers in the vast district west of the Euphrates are included. Here were *Apharsathchites*—who cannot be the Persians, as some have thought, because no Assyrian king ever seems to have penetrated to Persia, but may be the Parætaceni of Herodotus,† a Median people; *Tarpelites*—probably the people named among the Hebrews after Tubal;‡ *Apharsites*—also wrongly identified by some with the Persians, but probably another Median people; *Archevites*, from the ancient Erech (*Uruk*);§ *Babylonians*, not only from the city of Babylon, but also from its neigh-

* Ezra iv. 10.
† Herodotus, i. 101.
‡ Gen. x. 2.
§ Gen. x. 10.

bourhood; *Shushanchites*, from Shusan (*Susa*), the capital of Susiana; *Dehaites*—possibly the Dai of Herodotus,* because, though these were Persians, they were nomads who may have wandered far; *Elamites*, from the country of which Susa was capital. A terrific array! The very names would be imposing. All these people were now united in a common bond of enmity to the Jews of Jerusalem. Anticipating the fate of the Christians in the Roman Empire, though on very different grounds, the Jews seem to have been regarded by the peoples of Western Asia with positive antipathy as enemies of the human race. Their anti-social conduct had alienated all who knew them. But the letter of indictment brought a false charge against them. The opponents of the Jews could not formulate any charge out of their real grievances sufficiently grave to secure an adverse verdict from the supreme authority. They therefore trumped up an accusation of treason. It was untrue, for the Jews at Jerusalem had always been the most peaceable and loyal subjects of the Great King. The search which was made into the previous history of the city could only have brought to light any evidence of a spirit of independence as far back as the time of the Babylonian invasions. Still this was enough to supplement the calumnies of the irritated opponents which the Satrap and his secretary had been persuaded to echo with all the authority of their high position. Moreover, Egypt was now in revolt, and the king may have been persuaded to suspect the Jews of sympathy with the rebels. So Jerusalem was condemned as a "bad city"; the Persian officials went up and forcibly stopped the building of the walls,

* Herodotus, i. 125.

and the Jews were reduced to a condition of helpless misery.

This was the issue of Ezra's reformation. Can we call it a success? The answer to such a question will depend on what kind of success we may be looking for. Politically, socially, regarded from the standpoint of material profit and loss, there was nothing but the most dismal failure. But Ezra was not a statesman; he did not aim at national greatness, nor did he aim even at social amelioration. In our own day, when social improvements are regarded by many as the chief ends of government and philanthropy, it is difficult to sympathise with conduct which ran counter to the home comforts and commercial prosperity of the people. A policy which deliberately wrecked these obviously attractive objects of life in pursuit of entirely different aims is so completely remote from modern habits of thought and conduct that we have to make a considerable effort of imagination if we would understand the man who promoted it. How are we to picture him?

Ezra was an idealist. Now the success of an idealist is not to be sought for in material prosperity. He lives for his idea. If this idea triumphs he is satisfied, because he has attained the one kind of success he aimed at. He is not rich; but he never sowed the seed of wealth. He may never be honoured: he has determined to set himself against the current of popular fashion; how then can he expect popular favour? Possibly he may meet with misapprehension, contempt, hatred, death. The greatest Idealist the world ever saw was excommunicated as a heretic; insulted by His opponents, and deserted by most of His friends; tortured and crucified. The best of His disciples, those who had caught the enthusiasm of His idea, were

treated as the offscouring of the earth. Yet we now recognise that the grandest victory ever achieved was won at Calvary; and we now regard the travels of St. Paul, through stoning and scourging, through Jewish hatred and Christian jealousy, on to the block, as nothing less than a magnificent triumphant march. The idealist succeeds when his idea is established.

Judged by this standard—the only fair standard—Ezra's work cannot be pronounced a failure. On the contrary, he accomplished just what he aimed at. He established the separateness of the Jews. Among ourselves, more than two thousand years after his time, his great idea is still the most marked feature of his people. All along the ages it has provoked jealousy and suspicion; and often it has been met by cruel persecution. The separate people have been treated as only too separate from the rest of mankind. Thus the history of the Jews has become one long tragedy. It is infinitely sad. Yet it is incomparably more noble than the hollow comedy of existence to which the absence of all aims apart from personal pleasure reduces the story of those people who have sunk so low that they have no ideas. Moreover, with Ezra the racial idea was really subordinate to the religious idea. To secure the worship of God, free from all contamination—this was his ultimate purpose. In accomplishing it he must have a devoted people also free from contamination, a priesthood still more separate and consecrated, and a ritual carefully guarded and protected from defilement. Hence arose his great work in publishing the authoritative codified scriptures of the Jews. To a Christian all this has its defects—formalism, externalism, needless narrowness. Yet it succeeded in saving the religion of the Jews, and in transmitting that religion to future

ages as a precious casket containing the seed of the great spiritual faith for which the world was waiting. There is something of the schoolmaster in Ezra; but he is like the law he loved so devoutly—a schoolmaster who brings us to Christ. He was needed both for his times and also in order to lay the foundation of coming ages. Who shall say that such a man was not sent of God? How can we deny to his unique work the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? The harshness of its outward features must not blind us to the sublimity of its inner thought or the beneficence of its ultimate purpose.

CHAPTER XV.

NEHEMIAH THE PATRIOT.

NEHEMIAH i. 1-3.

THE Book of Nehemiah is the last part of the chronicler's narrative. Although it was not originally a separate work, we can easily see why the editor, who broke up the original volume into distinct books, divided it just where he did. An interval of twelve or thirteen years comes between Ezra's reformation and the events recorded in the opening of "Nehemiah." Still a much longer period was passed over in silence in the middle of "Ezra." * A more important reason for the division of the narrative may be found in the introduction of a new character. The book which now bears his name is largely devoted to the actions of Nehemiah; and it commences with an autobiographical narrative, which occupies the first six chapters and part of the seventh.

Nehemiah plunges suddenly into his story, without giving us any hints of his previous history. His father, Hacaliah, is only a name to us. It was necessary to state this name in order to distinguish the writer from other men named Nehemiah.† There is

* At Ezra vii. 1.

† *E.g.*, the Nehemiah of Ezra ii. 2, who is certainly another person.

no reason to think that his privileged position at court indicates high family connections. The conjecture of Ewald that he owed his important and lucrative office to his personal beauty and youthful attractions is enough to account for it. His appointment to the office formerly held by Zerubbabel is no proof that he belonged to the Jewish royal family. At the despotic Persian court the king's kindness towards a favourite servant would override all claims of princely rank. Besides, it is most improbable that we should have no hint of the Davidic descent if this had been one ground of the appointment. Eusebius and Jerome both describe Nehemiah as of the tribe of Judah. Jerome is notoriously inaccurate; Eusebius is a cautious historian, but it is not likely that in his late age—as long after Nehemiah as our age is after Thomas à Becket—he could have any trustworthy evidence beyond that of the Scriptures. The statement that the city of Jerusalem was the place of the sepulchres of his ancestors * lends some plausibility to the suggestion that Nehemiah belonged to the tribe of Judah. With this we must be content.

It is more to the point to notice that, like Ezra, the younger man, whose practical energy and high authority were to further the reforms of the somewhat doctrinaire scribe, was a Jew of the exile. Once more it is in the East, far away from Jerusalem, that the impulse is found for furthering the cause of the Jews. Thus we are again reminded that wave after wave sweeps up from the Babylonian plains to give life and strength to the religious and civic restoration.

The peculiar circumstances of Nehemiah deepen our

* Neh. ii. 3.

interest in his patriotic and religious work. In his case it was not the hardships of captivity that fostered the aspirations of the spiritual life, for he was in a position of personal ease and prosperity. We can scarcely think of a lot less likely to encourage the principles of patriotism and religion than that of a favourite upper servant in a foreign, heathen court. The office held by Nehemiah was not one of political rank. He was a palace slave, not a minister of state like Joseph or Daniel. But among the household servants he would take a high position. The cup-bearers had a special privilege of admission to the august presence of their sovereign in his most private seclusion. The king's life was in their hands; and the wealthy enemies of a despotic sovereign would be ready enough to bribe them to poison the king, if only they proved to be corruptible. The requirement that they should first pour some wine into their own hands, and drink the sample before the king, is an indication that fear of treachery haunted the mind of an Oriental monarch, as it does the mind of a Russian czar to-day. Even with this rough safeguard it was necessary to select men who could be relied upon. Thus the cup-bearers would become "favourites." At all events, it is plain that Nehemiah was regarded with peculiar favour by the king he served. No doubt he was a faithful servant, and his fidelity in his position of trust at court was a guarantee of similar fidelity in a more responsible and far more trying office.

Nehemiah opens his story by telling us that he was in "the palace," * or rather "the fortress," at Susa, the winter abode of the Persian monarchs—an Elamite city,

* Neh. i. 1.

the stupendous remains of which astonish the traveller in the present day—eighty miles east of the Tigris and within sight of the Bakhtiyari Mountains. Here was the great hall of audience, the counterpart of another at Persepolis. These two were perhaps the largest rooms in the ancient world next to that at Karnak. Thirty-six fluted columns, distributed as six rows of six columns each, slender and widely spaced, supported a roof extending two hundred feet each way. The month Chislev, in which the occurrence Nehemiah proceeds to relate happened, corresponds to parts of our November and December. The name is an Assyrian and Babylonian one, and so are all the names of the months used by the Jews. Further, Nehemiah speaks of what he here narrates as happening in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, and in the next chapter he mentions a subsequent event as occurring in the month Nisan * in the same year. This shows that he did not reckon the year to begin at Nisan, as the Jews were accustomed to reckon it. He must have followed the general Asiatic custom, which begins the year in the autumn, or else he must have regulated his dates according to the time of the king's accession. In either case we see how thoroughly un-Jewish the setting of his narrative is—unless a third explanation is adopted, viz., that the Jewish year, beginning in the spring, only counts from the adoption of Ezra's edition of The Law. Be this as it may, other indications of Orientalism, derived from his court surroundings, will attract our attention in our consideration of his language later on. No writer of the Bible reflects the influence of alien culture more clearly than Nehemiah. Outwardly, he is

* Neh. ii. 1

the most foreign Jew we meet with in Scripture. Yet in life and character he is the very ideal of a Jewish patriot. His patriotism shines all the more splendidly because it bursts out of a foreign environment. Thus Nehemiah shows how little his dialect and the manners he exhibits can be taken as the gauge of a man's true life.

Nehemiah states that, while he was thus at Susa, in winter residence with the court, one of his brethren, named Hanani, together with certain men of Judah, came to him.* The language here used will admit of our regarding Hanani as only a more or less distant relative of the cup-bearer; but a later reference to him at Jerusalem as "my brother Hanani" † shows that his own brother is meant.

Josephus has an especially graphic account of the incident. We have no means of discovering whether he drew it from an authentic source, but its picturesqueness may justify the insertion of it here: "Now there was one of those Jews who had been carried captive, who was cup-bearer to King Xerxes; his name was Nehemiah. As this man was walking before Susa, the metropolis of the Persians, he heard some strangers that were entering the city, after a long journey, speaking to one another in the Hebrew tongue; so he went to them and asked from whence they came; and when their answer was, that they came from Judæa, he began to inquire of them again in what state the multitude was, and in what condition Jerusalem was: and when they replied that they were in a bad state, for that their walls were thrown down to the ground, and that the neighbouring nations did a great deal of mischief

* Neh. i. 2. † Neh. vii. 2.

to the Jews, while in the day-time they over-ran the country and pillaged it, and in the night did them mischief, insomuch that not a few were led away captive out of the country, and out of Jerusalem itself, and that the roads were in the day-time found full of dead men. Hereupon Nehemiah shed tears, out of commiseration of the calamities of his countrymen ; and, looking up to heaven, he said, 'How long, O Lord, wilt thou overlook our nation, while it suffers so great miseries, and while we are made the prey and the spoil of all men ?' And while he staid at the gate, and lamented thus, one told him that the king was going to sit down to supper ; so he made haste, and went as he was, without washing himself, to minister to the king in his office of cup-bearer," etc.*

Evidently Nehemiah was expressly sought out. His influence would naturally be valued. There was a large Jewish community at Susa, and Nehemiah must have enjoyed a good reputation among his people; otherwise it would have been vain for the travellers to obtain an interview with him. The eyes of these Jews were turned to the royal servant as the fellow-countryman of greatest influence at court. But Nehemiah anticipated their message and relieved them of all difficulty by questioning them about the city of their fathers. Jerusalem was hundreds of miles away across the desert ; no regular methods of communication kept the Babylonian colony informed of the condition of the advance guard at the ancient capital ; therefore scraps of news brought by chance travellers were eagerly devoured by those who were anxious for the rare information. Plainly Nehemiah shared this anxiety.

* Josephus, *Ant.*, XI. v. 6.

His question was quite spontaneous, and it suggests that amid the distractions of his court life his thoughts had often reverted to the ancient home of his people. If he had not been truly patriotic, he could have used some device, which his palace experience would have readily suggested, so as to divert the course of this conversation with a group of simple men from the country, and keep the painful subject in the background. He must have seen clearly that for one in his position of influence to make inquiries about a poor and distressed community was to raise expectations of assistance. But his questions were earnest and eager, because his interest was genuine.

The answers to Nehemiah's inquiries struck him with surprise as well as grief. The shock with which he received them reminds us of Ezra's startled horror when the lax practices of the Jewish leaders were reported to him, although the trained court official did not display the abandonment of emotion which was seen in the student suddenly plunged into the vortex of public life and unprepared for one of those dread surprises which men of the world drill themselves to face with comparative calmness.

We must now examine the news that surprised and distressed Nehemiah. His brother and the other travellers from Jerusalem inform him that the descendants of the returned captives, the residents of Jerusalem, "are in great affliction and reproach"; and also that the city walls have been broken down and the gates burnt. The description of the defenceless and dishonoured state of the city is what most strikes Nehemiah. Now the question is to what calamities does this report refer? According to the usual understanding, it is a description of the state of Jerusalem which resulted

from the sieges of Nebuchadnezzar. But there are serious difficulties in the way of this view. Nehemiah must have known all about the tremendous events, one of the results of which was seen in the very existence of the Jewish colony of which he was a member. The inevitable consequences of that notorious disaster could not have come before him unexpectedly and as startling news. Besides, the present distress of the inhabitants is closely associated with the account of the ruin of the defences, and is even mentioned first. Is it possible that one sentence should include what was happening now, and what took place a century earlier, in a single picture of the city's misery? The language seems to point to the action of breaking through the walls rather than to such a general demolition of them as took place when the whole city was razed to the ground by the Babylonian invaders. Lastly, the action of Nehemiah cannot be accounted for on this hypothesis. He is plunged into grief by the dreadful news, and at first he can only mourn and fast and pray. But before long, as soon as he obtains permission from his royal master, he sets out for Jerusalem, and there his first great work is to restore the ruined walls. The connection of events shows that it is the information brought to him by Hanani and the other Jews from Jerusalem that rouses him to proceed to the city. All this points to some very recent troubles, which were previously unknown to Nehemiah. Can we find any indication of those troubles elsewhere?

The opening scene in the patriotic career of Nehemiah exactly fit in with the events which came under our consideration in the previous chapter. There we saw that the opposition to the Jews which is recorded as early as Ezra iv., but attributed to the reign of an

"Artaxerxes," must have been carried into effect under Artaxerxes Longimanus—Nehemiah's master. This must have been subsequent to the mission of Ezra in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, as Ezra makes no mention of its distressful consequences. The news reached Nehemiah in the twentieth year of the same reign. Therefore the mischief must have been wrought some time during the intervening thirteen years. We have no history of that period. But the glimpse of its most gloomy experiences afforded by the detached paragraph in Ezra iv. exactly fits in with the description of the resulting condition of Jerusalem in the Book of Nehemiah. This will fully account for Nehemiah's surprise and grief; it will also throw a flood of light on his character and subsequent action. If he had only been roused to repair the ravages of the old Babylonian invasions, there would have been nothing very courageous in his undertaking. Babylon itself had been overthrown, and the enemy of Babylon was now in power. Anything tending to obliterate the destructive glory of the old fallen empire might be accepted with favour by the Persian ruler. But the case is quite altered when we think of the more recent events. The very work Nehemiah was to undertake had been attempted but a few years before, and it had failed miserably. The rebuilding of the walls had then excited the jealousy of neighbouring peoples, and their gross misrepresentations had resulted in an official prohibition of the work. This prohibition, however, had only been executed by acts of violence, sanctioned by the government. Worse than all else, it was from the very Artaxerxes whom Nehemiah served that the sanction had been obtained. He was an easy-going sovereign, readily accessible to the advice of his ministers; in the earlier part of his

reign he showed remarkable favour towards the Jews, when he equipped and despatched Ezra on his great expedition, and it is likely enough that in the pressure of his multitudinous affairs the King would soon forget his unfavourable despatch. Nevertheless he was an absolute monarch, and the lives of his subjects were in his hands. For a personal attendant of such a sovereign to show sympathy with a city that had come under his disapproval was a very risky thing. Nehemiah may have felt this while he was hiding his grief from Artaxerxes. But if so, his frank confession at the first opportunity reflects all the more credit on his patriotism and the courage with which he supported it.

Patriotism is the most prominent principle in Nehemiah's conduct. Deeper considerations emerge later, especially after he has come under the influence of an enthusiastic religious teacher in the person of Ezra. But at first it is the city of his fathers that moves his heart. He is particularly distressed at its desolate condition, because the burial-place of his ancestors is there. The great anxiety of the Jews about the bodies of their dead, and their horror of the exposure of a corpse, made them look with peculiar concern on the tombs of their people. In sharing the sentiments that spring out of the habits of his people in this respect, Nehemiah gives a specific turn to his patriotism. He longs to guard and honour the last resting-place of his people; he would hear of any outrage on the city where their sepulchres are with the greatest distress. Thus filial piety mingles with patriotism, and the patriotism itself is localised, like that of the Greeks, and directed to the interests of a single city. Nehemiah here represents a different attitude from that of Mordecai. It is not the Jew that he

thinks of in the first instance, but Jerusalem; and Jerusalem is dear to him primarily, not because of his kinsmen who are living there, but because it is the city of his fathers' sepulchres, the city of the great past. Still the strongest feelings are always personal. Patriotism loves the very soil of the fatherland; but the depth and strength of the passion spring from association with an affection for the people that inhabit it. Without this patriotism degenerates into a flimsy sentiment. At Jerusalem Nehemiah develops a deep personal interest in the citizens. Even on the Susa acropolis, where the very names of these people are unknown to him, the thought of his ancestry gives a sanctity to the far-off city. Such a thought is enlarging and purifying. It lifts a man out of petty personal concerns; it gives him unselfish sympathies; it prepares demands for sacrifice and service. Thus, while the mock patriotism which cares only for glory and national aggrandisement is nothing but a vulgar product of enlarged selfishness, the true patriotism that awakens large human sympathies is profoundly unselfish, and shows itself to be a part of the very religion of a devoted man.

CHAPTER XVI.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER.

Nehemiah i. 4-11.

NEHEMIAH records the twofold effect of the melancholy news which his brother and the other travellers from Jerusalem brought him. Its first consequence was grief; its second prayer. The grief was expressed in the dramatic style of the Oriental by weeping, lamentations, fasting, and other significant acts and attitudes which the patriot kept up for some days. Demonstrative as all this appears to us, it was calm and restrained in comparison with Ezra's frantic outburst. Still it was the sign and fruit of heartfelt distress, for Nehemiah was really and deeply moved. Had the incident ended here, we should have seen a picture of patriotic sentiment, such as might be looked for in any loyal Jew, although the position of Nehemiah at court would have proved him loyal under exceptional circumstances. But the prayer which is the outcome of the soul-stirring thoughts and feelings of devout patriotism lifts the scene into a much higher interest. This prayer is singularly penetrating, revealing a keen insight into the secret of the calamities of Israel, and an exact perception of the relation of God to those calamities. It shows a knowledge of what we may call the theology of history, of the Divine laws and principles

which are above and behind the laws and principles indicated by the expression "the philosophy of history." In form it is a combination of three elements,—the language of devotion cultivated by Persian sages; expressions culled from the venerated Hebrew law-book, Deuteronomy; and new phrases called out by the new needs of the immediate occasion. Nehemiah shows how natural it is for a person to fall into an accepted dialect of worship, even in an original prayer the end of which is novel and special.

He opens his prayer with an expression that seems to be more Persian than Jewish. He does not make his appeal to Jehovah as the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but after the sacred name he adds the descriptive title "God of heaven." This is quite a favourite phrase of Nehemiah's. Thus in describing his interview with Artaxerxes he says, "So I prayed to the God of heaven"; * and at Jerusalem he answers the mockery of his opponents by exclaiming, "The God of heaven, He will prosper us." † Now the same expression is found repeatedly in the chronicler's version of royal edicts—in the edict of Cyrus,‡ in the edict of Darius,§ in the edict of Artaxerxes.‖ If it is indeed of Persian origin, the use of it by Nehemiah is most significant. In this case, while it indicates the speaker's unconscious adoption of the language of his neighbours and shows him to be a Jew of Oriental culture, it also illustrates a far-reaching process of Providence. Here is an exalted name for God, the origin of which is apparently Gentile, accepted and used by a devout Jew, and through his employment

* Neh. ii. 4. † Neh. ii. 20. ‡ Ezra i. 2.
§ Ezra vi. 10. ‖ Ezra vii. 12, 21, 23.

of it passing over into the Scriptures,* so that the religion of Israel is enriched by a phrase from abroad. It would be but a poor championship of the truth of the Hebrew revelation that would lead us to close our eyes to whatever of good is to be found outside its borders. Certainly we honour God by gladly perceiving that He has not left Himself entirely without witness in the dim-lit temple of Pagan thought. It is a ground for rejoicing that, while the science of Comparative Religion has not touched the unique pre-eminence of the Hebrew and Christian Faith, that science has been able to recover scattered pearls of truth that lay strewn over the waste of the world's wide thinking. If in a few rare cases some such gems had been found earlier and even set in the crown of Israel, we can only be thankful that the One Spirit who is the source of all revelation has thus evinced the breadth of His activity. Nor should it disturb our faith if it could be proved that more important elements of our religion did not originate among the Jews, but came from Babylonian, Persian, or Greek sources; for why should not God speak through a Gentile if He chooses so to do? This is not a point of dogma. It is simply a question of fact to be determined by historical inquiry.

We cannot say for certain, however, that Nehemiah's phrase was coined in a Persian mint. Its novelty, its absence from earlier Hebrew literature, and its repeated appearance in the edicts of Persian kings favour the notion. But we know that before reaching us these edicts have been more or less translated into Hebrew forms of thought, so that the phrase may possibly be

* It is used by the chronicler, and it is found in Jonah and Daniel, and once even in our recension of Genesis (Gen. xxiv. 7).

Jewish after all. Still even in that case it seems clear that it must have been first used in the East and under the Persian rule. The widening of his horizon and the elevation of his idea of Providence which resulted from the experience of the exile helped to enlarge and exalt the Jew's whole conception of God. Jehovah could no longer be thought of as a tribal divinity. The greater prophets had escaped from any such primitive notion much earlier, but not the bulk of the nation. Now the exiles saw that the domain of their God could not be limited to the hills and valleys of Palestine. They perceived how His arm reached from the river to the ends of the earth; how His might was everywhere supreme, directing the history of empires, overthrowing great monarchies, establishing new world-powers.

A more subtle movement of thought has been detected in the appearance of this suggestive phrase, "God of heaven." The idea of the transcendence of God is seen to be growing in the mind of the Jew. God appears to be receding into remote celestial regions —His greatness including distance. As yet this is only vaguely felt; but here we have the beginning of a characteristic of Judaism which becomes more and more marked in course of time, until it seems as though God were cut off from all direct connection with men on earth, and only administering the world through a whole army of intermediaries, the angels.

After this phrase with the Persian flavour, Nehemiah adds expressions borrowed from the Hebrew Book of Deuteronomy, a book with ideas and words from which his prayer is saturated throughout. God is described on the one hand as "great and terrible," and on the other hand as keeping "covenant and mercy for them

that love Him and observe His commandments.* The Deuteronomist adds "to a thousand generations"—a clause not needed by Nehemiah, who is now only concerned with one special occasion. The first part of the description is in harmony with the new and exalted title of God, and therefore it fits in well here. It is also suitable for the circumstances of the prayer, because in times of calamity we are impressed with the power and terror of Providence. There is another side to these attributes, however. The mention of them suggests that the sufferers have not fallen into the hand of man. Hanani and his fellow-Jews made no allusion to a Divine action; they could not see beyond the jealousy of neighbouring people in the whole course of events. But Nehemiah at once recognised God's hand. This perception would calm him as he watched the solemn movement of the drama carried up into heavenly regions. Then, aided by the cheering thought which came to him from the book of Divine revelation on which his prayer was moulded, Nehemiah turns to the covenant-keeping mercy of God. The covenant which he appeals to here must be that of the Book of Deuteronomy; his subsequent references to the contents of that book make this quite clear.

It is important to see that Nehemiah recognises the relation of God's mercy to His covenant. He perceives that the two go together, that the covenant does not dispense with the need of mercy any more than it forecloses the action of mercy. When the covenant people fall into sin, they cannot claim forgiveness as a right; nor can they ever demand deliverance from trouble on the ground of their pact with God. God does

* Neh. i. 5. See Deut. vii. 9.

not bargain with His children. A Divine covenant is not a business arrangement, the terms of which can be interpreted like those of a deed of partnership, and put into force by the determinate will of either party. The covenant is, from the first, a gracious Divine promise and dispensation, conditioned by certain requirements to be observed on man's side. Its very existence is a fruit of God's mercy, not an outcome of man's haggling, and its operation is just through the continuance of that mercy. It is true a promise, a sort of pledge, goes with the covenant; but that is a promise of mercy, a pledge of grace. It does not dispense with the mercy of God by converting what would otherwise be an act of pure grace on His part into a right which we possess and act upon of our own sole will. What it does is to afford a channel for the mercy of God, and to assure us of His mercy, which, however, remains mercy throughout.

From another point of view the covenant and the mercy go together. The mercy follows the covenant. The expression "the uncovenanted mercies of God" has been used in bitter irony, as though any hope that depended on such mercies was poor indeed, a bare refuge of despair. But so to treat the unknown goodness of God is to discredit that "ceaseless, unexhausted love" which has given us the latest and highest and best name of God. We do not know how far the vast ocean of the lovingkindness of God extends. On the other hand, certain definite assurances of mercy are given along the lines of a covenant. Therefore it is clearly wise and right for people who possess the covenant to follow those lines. Other people who are outside the covenant may meet with wonderful surprises in the infinite Fatherhood of God; but those of

His children who are in the home must expect to be treated according to the established order of the house. No doubt they too will have their grand surprises of Divine grace, for God does not tie Himself to forms and rules at home while He exercises liberty abroad. To do so would be to make the home a prison. But still His revelation of methods of grace is a clear indication that it is our duty to observe those methods, and that we have no ground of complaint if we do not receive the grace we seek when we wilfully neglect them. Here then we see the necessity of studying the revelation of the will and mind of God. That prayer has most ground of hope in it which keeps nearest to the thought and spirit of Scripture.

The terms of the covenant quoted by Nehemiah require obedience on the part of those who would receive mercy under it, and this obedience is needed in those who are seeking restoration and forgiveness as well as in those who have not fallen from the covenant throughout. The reference to "mercy" makes that clear. The penitent submits, and in the surrender of his will he is made the recipient of the Divine mercy. But behind the obedience is the spirit of love that prompts it. The mercy is for them that *love* God and observe His commandments. Love is the fulfilling of the law from the first. It is expected in the Old Testament as well as in the New; it is prescribed by the Deuteronomist as decidedly as by St. John, for it is the only ground of real obedience. The slavish terror of the lash which squeezes out a reluctant utterance of submission will not open the door for the mercy of God. The Divine covenant secures mercy only for those who return to their allegiance in a spirit of love.

Having thus set forth the grounds of his prayer in

his address to God and his plea of the covenant, Nehemiah proceeds to invoke the Divine attention to his petition. There is an echo of the courtier, perhaps, in his request that God's ear should be attentive and His eyes open;* but his whole conduct forbids the idea of servile obsequiousness. His prayer, he here says, is offered "day and night"; so his report of it may be regarded as a sort of final summing up of a long, persevering succession of prayers. The unwearying persistence of the man reveals two favourable features in his character—his earnestness of purpose and his unflagging faith. Our Lord denounces "vain repetitions" †—*i.e.*, repetitions the very value of which is thought to reside in their number, as though prayer could be estimated arithmetically. But the prayer that is repeated simply because the worshipper is too persistent to be satisfied till it is answered does not come into the category of "*vain* repetitions"; it is anything but empty.

Immediately after his invocation of God's gracious attention Nehemiah plunges into a confession of sin. Ezra's great prayer was wholly occupied with confession,‡ and this mournful exercise takes a large place in Nehemiah's prayer. But the younger man has one special ground of confession. The startling news of the ruinous condition of the recently restored city of Jerusalem rouses a sort of national conscience in his breast. He knows that the captivity was brought about as a chastisement for the sins of the Jews. That great lesson —so recklessly ignored when it was insisted on by Jeremiah—had been burnt into the deepest convictions of the exiles. Therefore Nehemiah makes no

* Neh. i. 6. † Matt. vi. 7. ‡ Ezra ix. 6-15.

complaint of the cruel behaviour of the enemies of Israel. He does not whine about the pitiable plight of the Jews. Their real enemies were their sins, and the explanation of their present distress was to be found in their own bad conduct. Thus Nehemiah goes to the root of the matter, and that without a moment's hesitation.

Further, it is interesting to see how he identifies himself with his people in this confession. Living far from the seat of the evil, himself a God-fearing, upright man, he might have been tempted to treat the citizens of Jerusalem as Job's comforters treated the patriarch of Uz, and denounce their sins from the secure heights of his own virtue. In declining to assume this pharisaic attitude, Nehemiah shows that he is not thinking of recent specific sins committed by the returned exiles. The whole history of Israel's apostasy is before him; he feels that the later as truly as the earlier calamities flow from this one deep, foul fountain of iniquity. Thus he can join himself with his fathers and the whole nation in the utterance of confession. This is different from the confession of Ezra, who was thinking of one definite sin which he did not share, but which he confessed in a priestly sympathy. Nehemiah is less concerned with formal legal precepts. He is more profoundly moved by the wide and deep course of his people's sin generally. Still it is a mark of self-knowledge and true humility, as well as of patriotism, that he honestly associates himself with his fellow-countrymen. He perceives that particular sins, such as those found in the recent misconduct of the Jews, are but symptoms of the underlying sinful character; and that while circumstances may save the individual from the temptation to exhibit every

one of these symptoms, they are accidental, and they cannot be set to his credit. The common sin is in him still; therefore he may well join himself to the penitents, even though he has not participated in all their evil deeds. The solidarity of the race is, unhappily, never more apparent than in its sin. This sin is especially the "one touch of" *fallen* "nature" that "makes the whole world kin." It was to a trait of frailty that Shakespeare was alluding when he coined his famous phrase, as the context proves.* The trail of the serpent is over every human life, and in this ugly mark we have a terrible sign of human brotherhood. Of all the elements of "Common Prayer," confession can be most perfectly shared by every member of a congregation, if only all the worshippers are in earnest and know their own hearts.

Nehemiah does not enter much into detail with this confession. It is sweeping and widely comprehensive. Two points, however, may be noticed. First, he refers to the Godward aspect of sin, its personal character as an offence against God. Thus he says, "We have dealt very corruptly *against Thee*."† So the prodigal first confesses that he has sinned "against heaven."‡ Secondly, he makes mention more than once of the commandments of Moses. The name of Moses is often appealed to with reverence in the history of this period of Ezra and Nehemiah. Evidently the minds of men reverted to the great founder of the nation at the time of national penitence and restoration. Under these circumstances no new edition of The Law could have been adopted unless it was believed to have embodied the substance of the older teaching.

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* *Troilus and Cressida*, Act iii., Scene 3. † Neh. i. 7

‡ Luke xv. 18.

After his confession Nehemiah goes on to appeal to the Divine promises of restoration made to the penitent in the great national covenant. He sums them up in a definite sentence, not quoting any one utterance of Deuteronomy, but gathering together the various promises of mercy and dovetailing almost the very language of them together, so as to present us with the total result. These promises recognise the possibility of transgression and the consequent scattering of the people so often insisted on by the prophets and especially by Jeremiah. They then go on to offer restoration on condition of repentance and a return to obedient allegiance. It is to be observed that this is all laid down on national lines. The nation sins; the nation suffers; the nation is restored to its old home. This is very much a characteristic of Judaism, and it gives a breadth to the operation of great religious principles which would otherwise be unattainable when almost all regard for a future life is left out of account. Christianity dwells more on individualism, but it obtains space at once by bringing the future life into prominence. In the Old Testament the future of the nation takes much the same place as that occupied by the future of the individual in the New Testament.

In reviewing the history of God's way with Israel Nehemiah lays his finger on the great fact of redemption. The Jews are the "people whom God had redeemed by His great power and His strong hand."* Universal usage compels us to fix upon the exodus under Moses, and not Zerubbabel's pilgrimage, as the event to which Nehemiah here alludes. That event, which was the birth of the nation, always comes out in Hebrew litera-

* Neh. i. 10.

ture as the supreme act of Divine grace. In some respects its position in the religion of Israel may be likened to that of the cross of Christ in Christianity. In both cases God's great work of redeeming His children is the supreme proof of His mercy and the grand source of assurance in praying to Him for new help. On the ground of the great redemption Nehemiah advances to the special petition with which his prayer closes. This is most definite. It is on behalf of his own need; it is for immediate help—"this day"; it is for one particular need—in his proposed approach to Artaxerxes to plead the cause of his people. Here then is an instance of the most special prayer. It is "to the point," and for most pressing present requirements. We cannot but be struck with the reality of such a prayer. Having reached this definite petition Nehemiah closes abruptly.

When we glance back over the prayer as a whole, we are struck with its order and progress. As in our Lord's model prayer, the first part is absorbed with thoughts of God; it is after uplifting his thoughts to heaven that the worshipper comes down to human need. Then a large place is given to sin. This comes first in the consideration of man after the worshipper has turned his eyes from the contemplation of God and felt the contrast of darkness after light. Lastly, the human subjects of the prayer begin in the wider circle of the whole nation; only at the very last, in little more than a sentence, Nehemiah brings forward his own personal petition. Thus the prayer gradually narrows down from the Divine to the human, and from the national to the individual: as it narrows it becomes more definite, till it ends in a single point; but this point is driven home by the weight and force of all that precedes.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRAYER ANSWERED.

NEHEMIAH ii. 1-8.

NEHEMIAH'S prayer had commenced on celestial heights of meditation among thoughts of Divine grace and glory, and when it had stooped to earth it had swept over the wide course of his nation's history and poured out a confession of the whole people's sin; but the final point of it was a definite request for the prospering of his contemplated interview with the king. Artaxerxes was an absolute despot, surrounded with the semi-divine honours that Orientals associate with the regal state, and yet in speaking of him before "the God of heaven," "the great and terrible God," Nehemiah loses all awe for his majestic pomp, and describes him boldly as "this man." * In the supreme splendour of God's presence all earthly glory fades out of the worshipper's sight, like a glow-worm's spark lost in the sunlight. Therefore no one can be dazzled by human magnificence so long as he walks in the light of God. Here, however, Nehemiah is speaking of an absent king. Now it is one thing to be fearless of man when alone with God in the seclusion of one's own chamber, and quite another to be equally imperturbable in the

* Neh. i. 11.

world and away from the calming influence of undisturbed communion with Heaven. We must remember this if we would do justice to Nehemiah, because otherwise we might be surprised that his subsequent action did not show all the courage we should have expected.

Four months passed away before Nehemiah attempted anything on behalf of the city of his fathers. The Jewish travellers probably thought that their visit to the court servant had been barren of all results. We cannot tell how this interval was occupied, but it is clear that Nehemiah was brooding over his plans all the time, and inwardly fortifying himself for his great undertaking. His ready reply when he was suddenly and quite unexpectedly questioned by the king shows that he had made the troubles of Jerusalem a subject of anxious thought, and that he had come to a clear decision as to the course which he should pursue. Time spent in such fruitful thinking is by no means wasted. There is a hasty sympathy that flashes up at the first sign of some great public calamity, eager "to do something," but too blind in its impetuosity to consider carefully what ought to be done; and this is often the source of greater evils, because it is inconsiderate. In social questions especially people are tempted to be misled by a blind, impatient philanthropy. The worst consequence of yielding to such an influence—and one is strongly urged to yield for fear of seeming cold and indifferent—is that the certain disappointment that follows is likely to provoke despair of all remedies, and to end in cynical callousness. Then, in the rebound, every enthusiastic effort for the public good is despised as but the froth of sentimentality.

Very possibly Nehemiah had no opportunity of speaking to the king during these four months. A Persian sovereign was waited on by several cup-bearers, and it is likely enough that Nehemiah's terms of service were intermittent. On his return to the court in due course he may have had the first occasion for presenting his petition. Still it is not to be denied that he found great difficulty in bringing himself to utter it, and then only when it was dragged out of him by the king. It was a petition of no common kind. To request permission to leave the court might be misconstrued unfavourably. Herodotus says that people had been put to death both by Darius and by Xerxes for showing reluctance to accompany their king. Then had not this very Artaxerxes sanctioned the raid upon Jerusalem which had resulted in the devastation which Nehemiah deplored and which he desired to see reversed? If the king remembered his rescript to the Syrian governors, might he not regard a proposal for the reversal of its policy as a piece of unwarrantable impertinence on the part of his household slave—nay, as an indication of treasonable designs? All this would be apparent enough to Nehemiah as he handed the wine-cup on bended knee to the Great King. Is it wonderful then that he hesitated to speak, or that he was "very sore afraid" when the king questioned him about his sadness of countenance?

There is an apparent contradiction in Nehemiah's statement concerning this sad appearance of his countenance which is obscured in our English translation by the unwarrantable insertion of the word "beforetime" in Nehemiah ii. 1, so that the sentence reads, "Now I had not been *beforetime* sad in his presence." This word is a gloss of the translators. What Nehemiah

really says is simply, "Now I had not been sad in his presence"—a statement that evidently refers to the occasion then being described, and not to previous times nor to the cup-bearer's habitual bearing. Yet in the very next sentence we read how the king asked Nehemiah the reason for the sadness of his countenance. The contradiction would be as apparent to the writer as it is to us; and if he left it Nehemiah meant it to stand, no doubt intending to suggest by a dramatic description of the scene that he attempted to disguise his sorrow, but that his attempt was ineffectual—so strong, so marked was his grief. It was a rule of the court etiquette, apparently, that nobody should be sad in the king's presence. A gloomy face would be unpleasant to the monarch. Shakespeare's Cæsar knew the security of cheerful associates when he said:—

> "Let me have men about me that are fat;
> Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights:
> Yond' Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
> He thinks too much; such men are dangerous."

Besides, was not the sunshine of the royal countenance enough to drive away all clouds of trouble from the minds of his attendants? Nehemiah had drilled himself into the courtier's habitual pleasantness of demeanour. Nevertheless, though passing, superficial signs of emotion may be quite reined in by a person who is trained to control his features, indications of the permanent conditions of the inner life are so deeply cut in the lines and curves of the countenance that the most consummate art of an actor cannot disguise them. Nehemiah's grief was profound and enduring. Therefore he could not hide it. Moreover, it is a king's business to understand men, and long practice makes

him an expert in it. So Artaxerxes was not deceived by the well-arranged smile of his servant; it was evident to him that something very serious was troubling the man. The sickness of a favourite attendant would not be unknown to a kind and observant king. Nehemiah was not ill, then. The source of his trouble must have been mental. Sympathy and curiosity combined to urge the king to probe the matter to the bottom. Though alarmed at his master's inquiry, the trembling cup-bearer could not but give a true answer. Here was his great opportunity—thrust on him since he had not had the courage to find it for himself. Artaxerxes was not to be surprised that a man should grieve when the city of his ancestors was lying desolate. But this information did not satisfy the king. His keen eye saw that there was more behind. Nehemiah had some request which as yet he had not been daring enough to utter. With real kindness Artaxerxes invited him to declare it.

The critical moment had arrived. How much hangs upon the next sentence—not the continuance of the royal favour only, but perhaps the very life of the speaker, and, what is of far more value to a patriot, the future destiny of his people! Nehemiah's perception of its intense importance is apparent in the brief statement which he here inserts in his narrative: "So I prayed to the God of heaven." * He is accustomed to drop in suggestive notes on his own private feelings and behaviour along the course of his narrative. Only a few lines earlier we came upon one of these characteristic autobiographical touches in the words, "Now I had not been sad in his presence," † soon followed by

* Neh. ii. 4. † Neh. ii. 1.

another, "Then I was very sore afraid."* Such remarks vivify the narrative, and keep up an interest in the writer. In the present case the interjection is peculiarly suggestive. It was natural that Nehemiah should be startled at the king's abrupt question, but it is an indication of his devout nature that as the crisis intensified his fear passed over into prayer. This was not a set season of prayer; the pious Jew was not in his temple, nor at any *proseuché*; there was no time for a full, elaborate, and orderly utterance, such as that previously recorded. Just at the moment of need, in the very presence of the king, with no time to spare, by a flash of thought, Nehemiah retires to that most lonely of all lonely places, "the inner city of the mind," there to seek the help of the Unseen God. And it is enough: the answer is as swift as the prayer; in a moment the weak man is made strong for his great effort.

Such a sudden uplifting of the soul to God is the most real of all prayers. This at least is genuine and heartfelt, whatever may be the case with the semi-liturgical composition the thought and beauty of which engaged our attention in the previous chapter. But then the man who can thus find God in a moment must be in the habit of frequently resorting to the Divine Presence; like the patriarchs, he must be walking with God. The brief and sudden prayer reaches heaven as an arrow suddenly shot from the bow; but it goes right home, because he who lets it off in his surprise is a good marksman, well practised. This ready prayer only springs to the lips of a man who lives in a daily habit of praying. We must associate the two kinds

* Neh. ii. 2.

of prayer in order to account for that which is now before us. The deliberate exercises of adoration, confession, and petition prepare for the one sudden ejaculation. There we see the deep river which supplies the sea of devotion from which the momentary prayer is cast up as the spray of a wave. Therefore it was in a great measure on account of his deliberate and unwearying daily prayers that Nehemiah was prepared with his quick cry to God in the crisis of need. We may compare his two kinds of prayer with our Lord's full and calm intercession in John xvii. and the short agonised cry from the cross. In each case we feel that the sudden appeal to God in the moment of dire necessity is the most intense and penetrating prayer. Still we must recognise that this comes from a man who is much in prayer. The truth is that beneath both of these prayers—the calm, meditative utterance, and the simple cry for help—there lies the deep, true essence of prayer, which is no thing of words at all, but which lives on, even when it is voiceless, in the heart of one of whom it can be said, as Tennyson says of Mary,—

"Her eyes are homes of silent prayer."

Fortified by his moment's communion with God, Nehemiah now makes known his request. He asks to be sent to Jerusalem to repair its ruins and fortify the city. This petition contains more than lies on the surface of the words. Nehemiah does not say that he wishes to be appointed Governor of Jerusalem in the high office which had been held by Zerubbabel, but the subsequent narrative shows that he was assigned to this position, and his report of the king's orders about the house he was to dwell in at Jerusalem almost implies

as much.* For one of the royal household servants to be appointed to such a position was doubtless not so strange an anomaly in the East in Nehemiah's day, as it would be with us now. The king's will was the fountain of all honour, and the seclusion in which the Persian monarchs lived gave unusual opportunities for the few personal attendants who were admitted into their presence to obtain great favours from them. Still Nehemiah's attitude seems to show some self-confidence in a young man not as yet holding any political office. Two or three considerations, however, will give a very different complexion to his request. In the first place, his city was in a desperate plight: deliverance was urgently needed; no help appeared to be forthcoming unless he stepped into the breach. If he failed, things could hardly become worse than they were already. Was this an occasion when a man should hold back from a sense of modesty? There is a false modesty which is really a product of the self-consciousness that is next door to vanity. The man who is entirely oblivious of self will sometimes forget to be modest. Moreover, Nehemiah's request was at the peril of his life. When it was granted he would be launched on a most hazardous undertaking. The ambition—if we must use the word—which would covet such a career is at the very antipodes of that of the vulgar adventurer who simply seeks power in order to gratify his own sense of importance. "Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not." † That humbling rebuke may be needed by many men; but it was not needed by Nehemiah, for he was not seeking the great things for *himself*.

* Neh. ii. 8.

† Jer. xlv. 5.

It was a daring request; yet the king received it most favourably. Again, then, we have the pleasing spectacle of a Persian monarch showing kindness to the Jews. This is not the first time that Artaxerxes has proved himself their friend, for there can be no doubt that he is the same sovereign as the Artaxerxes who despatched Ezra with substantial presents to the aid of the citizens of Jerusalem some twelve or thirteen years before.

Here, however, a little difficulty emerges. In the interval between the mission of Ezra and that of Nehemiah an adverse decree had been extracted from the compliant sovereign—the decree referred to in Ezra iv. Now the semi-divinity that was ascribed to a Persian monarch involved the fiction of infallibility, and this was maintained by a rule making it unconstitutional for him to withdraw any command that he had once issued. How then could Artaxerxes now sanction the building of the walls of Jerusalem, which but a few years before he had expressly forbidden? The difficulty vanishes on a very little consideration. The king's present action was not the withdrawal of his earlier decree, for the royal order to the Samaritans had been just to the effect that the building of the walls of Jerusalem should be stopped.* This order had been fully executed; moreover it contained the significant words, "until another decree shall be made by me." † Therefore a subsequent permission to resume the work, issued under totally different circumstances, would not be a contradiction to the earlier order; and now that a trusty servant of the king was to superintend the operations, no danger of insurrection need be

* Ezra iv. 21. † *Ibid.*

apprehended. Then the pointed notice of the fact that the chief wife—described as "The Queen"—was sitting by Artaxerxes, is evidently intended to imply that her presence helped the request of Nehemiah. Orientalists have discovered her name, Damaspia, but nothing about her to throw light on her attitude towards the Jews. She may have been even a proselyte, or she may have simply shown herself friendly towards the young cup-bearer. No political or religious motives are assigned for the conduct of Artaxerxes here. Evidently Nehemiah regarded the granting of his request as a direct result of the royal favour shown towards himself. "Put not your trust in princes"* is a wholesome warning, born of the melancholy disappointment of the pilgrims who had placed too much hope in the Messianic glamour with which the career of poor Zerubbabel opened; but it does not mean that a man is to fling away the advantages which accrue to him from the esteem he has won in high places. Ever since the Israelites showed no scruple in spoiling the Egyptians—and who could blame them for seizing at the eleventh hour the overdue wages of which they had been defrauded for generations?—"the people of God" have not been slow to reap harvests of advantage whenever persecution or cold indifference has given place to the brief, fickle favour of the world. Too often this has been purchased at the price of the loss of liberty—a ruinous exchange. Here is the critical point. The difficulty is to accept aid without any compromise of principle. Sycophancy is the besetting snare of the courtier, and when the Church

† Psalm cxlvi. 3.

turns courtier she is in imminent danger of that, in her, most fatal fault. But Nehemiah affords a splendid example to the contrary. In his grand independence of character we have a fine instance of a wise, strong use of worldly advantages, entirely free from the abuses that too commonly accompany them. Thus he anticipates the idea of the Apocalypse where it is said, "The earth helped the woman."*

The interest of the king in his cup-bearer is shown by his repeated questions, and by the determined manner in which he drags out of Nehemiah all his plans and wishes. Every request is granted. The favourite servant is too much valued to get his leave of absence without some limit of time, but even that is fixed in accordance with Nehemiah's desire. He asks and obtains letters of introduction to the governors west of the Euphrates. The letters were most necessary, because these very men had bestirred themselves to obtain the adverse decree but a very few years before. It is not likely that they had all veered round to favour the hated people against whom they had just been exhibiting the most severe antagonism. Nehemiah therefore showed a wise caution in obtaining a sort of "safe conduct." The friendliness of Artaxerxes went still further. The king ordered timber to be provided for the building and fortifying operations contemplated by his cup-bearer; this was to be furnished from a royal hunting park—a "Paradise," to use the Persian word —probably one which formerly belonged to the royal demesne of Judah, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, as the head-forester bore a Hebrew name, "Asaph."† Costly cedars for the temple had to be

* Rev. xii. 16. † Neh. ii. 8.

fetched all the way from the distant mountains of Lebanon, in Phœnician territory; but the city gates and the castle and house carpentry could be well supplied from the oaks and other indigenous timber of Palestine.

All these details evince the practical nature of Nehemiah's patriotism. His last word on the happy conclusion of the interview with Artaxerxes, which he had anticipated with so much apprehension, shows that higher thoughts were not crushed out by the anxious consideration of external affairs. He concludes with a striking phrase, which we have met with earlier on the lips of Ezra.* "And the king granted me, *according to the good hand of my God upon me.*" † Here is the same recognition of Divine Providence, and the same graphic image of the "hand" of God laid on the writer. It looks as though the younger man had been already a disciple of the Great Scribe. But his utterance is not the less genuine and heartfelt on that account. He perceives that his prayer has been heard and answered. The strength and beauty of his life throughout may be seen in his constant reference of all things to God in trust and prayer before the event, and in grateful acknowledgment afterwards.

* Ezra vii. 28. † Neh. ii. 8.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE.

NEHEMIAH ii. 9-20.

NEHEMIAH'S journey up to Jerusalem differed in many respects from Ezra's great expedition, with a host of emigrants, rich stores, and all the accompaniments of a large caravan. Burdened with none of these encumbrances, the newly appointed governor would be able to travel in comparative ease. Yet while Ezra was "ashamed" to ask for a military escort to protect his defenceless multitude and the treasures which were only too likely to attract the vulture eyes of roving hordes of Bedouin, because, as he tells us, he feared such a request might be taken as a sign of distrust in his God, Nehemiah accepted a troop of cavalry without any hesitation. This difference, however, does not reflect any discredit on the faith of the younger man.

In the first place, his claims on the king were greater than those of Ezra, who would have had to petition for the help of soldiers it he had wanted it, whereas Nehemiah received his body-guard as a matter of course. Ezra had been a private subject previous to his appointment, and though he had subsequently been endowed with large authority of an indefinite character, that authority was confined to the execution of the Jewish law; it had nothing to do with the general con-

cerns of the Persian government in Syria or Palestine. But Nehemiah came straight from the court, where he had been a favourite servant of the king, and he was now made the official governor of Jerusalem. It was only in accordance with custom that he should have an escort assigned him when he went to take possession of his district. Then, probably to save time, Nehemiah would travel by the perilous desert route through Tadmor, and thus cover the whole journey in about two months—a route which Ezra's heavy caravan may have avoided. When he reached Syria the fierce animosity which had been excited by Ezra's domestic reformation—and which therefore had broken out after Ezra's expedition—would make it highly dangerous for a Jew who was going to aid the hated citizens of Jerusalem to travel through the mixed population.

Nevertheless, after allowing their full weight to these considerations, may we not still detect an interesting trait of the younger man's character in Nehemiah's ready acceptance of the guard with which Ezra had deliberately dispensed? In the eyes of the world the idealist Ezra must have figured as a most unpractical person. But Nehemiah, a courtier by trade, was evidently well accustomed to "affairs." Naturally a cautious man, he was always anxious in his preparations, though no one could blame him for lack of decision or promptness at the moment of action. Now the striking thing about his character in this relation—that which lifts it entirely above the level of purely secular prudence—is the fact that he closely associated his careful habits with his faith in Providence. He would have regarded the rashness which excuses itself on the plea of faith as culpable presumption. His religion was all the more real and thorough because it did not confine itself to

unearthly experiences, or refuse to acknowledge the Divine in any event that was not visibly miraculous. No man was ever more impressed with the great truth that God was with him. It was this truth, deeply rooted in his heart, that gave him the joy which became the strength, the very inspiration of his life. He was sure that his commonest secular concerns were moulded by the hand of his God. Therefore to his mind the detachment of Persian cavalry was as truly assigned to him by God as if it had been a troop of angels sent straight from the hosts of heaven.

The highly dangerous nature of his undertaking and the necessity for exercising the utmost caution were apparent to Nehemiah as soon as he approached Jerusalem. Watchful enemies at once showed themselves annoyed "that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel."* It was not any direct injury to themselves, it was the prospect of some favour to the hated Jews that grieved these people; though doubtless their jealousy was in part provoked by dread lest Jerusalem should regain the position of pre-eminence in Palestine which had been enjoyed during her depression by the rival city of Samaria. Under these circumstances Nehemiah followed the tactics which he had doubtless learnt during his life among the treacherous intrigues of an Oriental court. He did not at first reveal his plans. He spent three days quietly in Jerusalem. Then he took his famous ride round the ruins of the city walls. This was as secret as King Alfred's exploration of the camp of the Danes. Without breathing a word of his intention to the Jews, and taking only a horse or an ass to ride on himself and a small body of

* Neh. ii. 10.

trusty attendants on foot, Nehemiah set out on his tour in the dead of night. No doubt the primary purpose of this secrecy was that no suspicion of his design should reach the enemies of the Jews. Had these men suspected it they would have been beforehand with their plans for frustrating it; spies and traitors would have been in the field before Nehemiah was prepared to receive them; emissaries of the enemy would have perverted the minds even of loyal citizens. It would be difficult enough under any circumstances to rouse the dispirited people to undertake a work of great toil and danger. If they were divided in counsel from the first it would be hopeless. Moreover, in order to persuade the Jews to fortify their city, Nehemiah must be prepared with a clear and definite proposal. He must be able to show them that he understands exactly in what condition their ruined fortifications are lying. For his personal satisfaction, too, he must see the ruins with his own eyes. Ever since the travellers from Jerusalem who met him at Susa had shocked him with their evil tidings, a vision of the broken walls and charred gates had been before his imagination. Now he would really see the very ruins themselves, and ascertain whether all was as bad as it had been represented.

The uncertainty which still surrounds much of the topography of Jerusalem, owing to its very foundations having been turned over by the ploughshare of the invader, while some of its sacred sites have been buried under huge mounds of rubbish, renders it impossible to trace Nehemiah's night ride in all its details. If we are to accept the latest theory, according to which the gorge hitherto regarded as the *Tyropœon* is really the ancient Valley of Hinnom, some other sites will need considerable readjustment. The "Gate of the

Valley" seems to be one near the head of the Valley of Hinnom; we know nothing of the "Dragon Well"; the "Dung Port" would be a gateway through which the city offal was flung out to the fires in the Valley of Hinnom; the "King's Pool" is very likely that afterwards known as the "Pool of Siloam." The main direction of Nehemiah's tour of inspection is fairly definite to us. He started at the western exit from the city and passed down to the left, to where the Valley of Hinnom joins the Valley of the Kidron; ascending this valley, he found the masses of stones and heaps of rubbish in such confusion that he was compelled to leave the animal he had been riding hitherto and to clamber over the ruins on foot. Reaching the north-eastern corner of the Valley of the Kidron, he would turn round by the northern side of the city, where most of the gates had been situated, because there the city, which was difficult of access to the south and the east on account of the encircling ravines, could be easily approached.

And what did he gain by his journey? He gained knowledge. The reformation that is planned by the student at his desk, without any reference to the actual state of affairs, will be, at best, a Utopian dream. But if the dreamer is also a man of resources and opportunities, his impracticable schemes may issue in incalculable mischief. "Nothing is more terrible," says Goethe, "than *active ignorance*." We can smile at a knight-errant Don Quixote; but a Don Quixote in power would be as dangerous as a Nero. Most schemes of socialism, though they spring from the brains of amiable enthusiasts, break up like empty bubbles on the first contact with the real world. It is especially necessary, too, to know the worst. Op-

timism is very cheering in idea, but when it is indulged in to the neglect of truth, with an impatient disregard for the shady side of life, it simply leads its devotees into a fools' paradise. The highest idealist must have something of the realist in him if he would ever have his ideas transformed into facts.

Further, it is to be noted that Nehemiah would gather his information for himself; he could not be content with hearsay evidence. Here again he reveals the practical man. It is not that he distrusts the honesty of any agents he might employ, nor merely that he is aware of the deplorable inaccuracy of observers generally and the inability of nearly all people to give an uncoloured account of what they have seen; but he knows that there is an impression to be obtained by personal observation which the most correct description cannot approach. No map or book will give a man a right idea of a place that he has never visited. If this is true of the external world, much more is it the case with those spiritual realities which the eye hath not seen, and which *therefore* it has not entered into the heart of man to conceive. Wordsworth frequently refers to his sensations of surprise and disappointment passing over into a new delight when he first beheld scenes long ago described to him in verse of legend. He finds "Yarrow visited" very unlike "Yarrow unvisited." One commonplace distinction we must all have noticed under similar circumstances —viz., that the imagination is never rich and varied enough to supply us with the complications of the reality. Before we have looked at it our idea of the landscape is too simple, and an invariable impression produced by the actual sight of it is to make us feel how much more elaborate it is. Indeed a personal

investigation of most phenomena reveals an amount of complication previously unsuspected. Where the investigation is, like Nehemiah's, concerned with an evil we propose to attack, the result is that we begin to see that the remedy cannot be so simple as we imagined before we knew all the facts.

But the chief effect of Nehemiah's night ride would be to impress him with an overwhelming sense of the desolation of Jerusalem. We may know much by report, but we feel most keenly that of which we have had personal experience. Thus the news of a gigantic cataclysm in China does not affect us with a hundredth part of the emotion that is excited in us by a simple street accident seen from our own windows. The man whose heart will be moved enough for him to sacrifice himself seriously in relieving misery is he who will first "*visit* the fatherless and widows in their affliction."* Then the proof that the impression is deep and real, and not a mere idle sentiment, will be seen in the fact that it prompts action. Nehemiah was moved to tears by the report of the ruinous condition of Jerusalem, which reached him in the far-off palace beyond the Euphrates. What the scene meant to him as he slowly picked his way among the huge masses of masonry is seen by his conduct immediately afterwards. It must have stirred him profoundly. The silence of the sleeping city, broken now and again by the dismal howls of packs of dogs scouring the streets, or perhaps by the half-human shrieks of jackals on the deserted hills in the outlying country; the dreary solitude of the interminable heaps of ruins; the mystery of strange objects half-descried in the distance

* James i. 27.

by starlight, or, at best, by moonlight; the mournful discovery, on nearer view, of huge building stones tumbled over and strewn about on mountainous heaps of dust and rubbish; the gloom, the desolation, the terror,—all this was enough to make the heart of a patriot faint with despair. Was it possible to remedy such huge calamities?

Nehemiah does not despair. He has no time to grieve. We hear no more of his weeping and lamentation and fasting. Now he is spurred on to decisive action.

Fortified by the knowledge he has acquired in his adventurous night ride, and urged by the melancholy sights he has witnessed, Nehemiah loses no time in bringing his plans before the oligarchy of nobles who held the rule in Jerusalem previous to his coming, as well as the rest of the Jews. Though he is now the officially appointed governor, he cannot arrange matters with a high hand. He must enlist the sympathy and encourage the faith, both of the leaders and of the people generally.

The following points in his speech to the Jews may be noticed. First, he calls attention to the desolate condition of Jerusalem.* This is a fact well known. "Ye *see* the evil case that we are in," he says, "how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire." The danger was that apathy would succeed to despair, for it is possible for people to become accustomed to the most miserable condition. The reformer must infuse a "Divine discontent"; and the preliminary step is to get the evil plight well recognised and heartily disliked. In the second place, Nehemiah

* Neh. ii. 17, 18.

exhorts the nobles and people to join him in building the walls. So now he clearly reveals his plan. The charm in his utterance here is in the use of the first person plural: not the first person *singular*—he cannot do the work alone, nor does he wish to; not the *second* person—though he is the authoritative governor, he does not enjoin on others a task the toil and responsibility of which he will not share himself. In the genuine use of this pronoun "we" there lies the secret of all effective exhortation. Next Nehemiah proceeds to adduce reasons for his appeal. He calls out the sense of patriotic pride in the remark, "that we be no more a reproach"; and he goes further, for the Jews are the people of God, and for them to fail is for reproach to be cast on the name of God Himself. Here is the great religious motive for not permitting the city of God to lie in ruins, as it is to-day the supreme motive for keeping all taint of dishonour from the Church of Christ.

But direct encouragements are needed. A sense of shame may rouse us from our lethargy, and yet in the end it will be depressing if it does not give place to the inspiration of a new hope. Now Nehemiah has two fresh grounds of encouragement. He first names that which he esteems highest—the presence and help of God in his work. "I told them," he says, "of the hand of my God which was good upon me." How could he despair, even at the spectacle of the ruined walls and gateways, with the consciousness of this great and wonderful truth glowing in his heart? Not that he was a mystic weaving fantastic dreams out of the filmy substance of his own vague feelings. It is true he felt impelled by the strong urging of his patriotism, and he knew that God was in that holy passion. Yet

his was an objective mind and he recognised the hand of God chiefly in external events—in the Providence that opens doors and indicates paths, that levels mountains of difficulty and fills up impassable chasms, that even bends the wills of great kings to do its bidding. This action of Providence he had himself witnessed; his very presence at Jerusalem was a token of it. He, once a household slave in the jealous seclusion of an Oriental palace, was now the governor of Jerusalem, appointed to his post for the express purpose of restoring the miserable city to strength and safety. In all this Nehemiah felt the hand of God upon him. Then it was a gracious and merciful Providence that had led him. Therefore he could not but own further that the hand of God was "good." He perceived God's work, and that work was to him most wonderfully full of lovingkindness. Here indeed was the greatest of all encouragements to proceed. It was well that Nehemiah had the devout insight to perceive it; a less spiritually minded man might have received the marvellous favour without ever discovering the hand from which it came. Following the example of the miserable, worldly Jacob, some of us wake up in our Bethel to exclaim with surprise, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not."* But even that is better than to slumber on in dull indifference, too dead to recognise the Presence that guides and blesses every footstep, provoking the melancholy lamentation: "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider." †

Lastly, Nehemiah not only perceived the hand of God and took courage from his assurance of the fact;

* Gen. xxviii. 16. † Isa. i. 3.

he made this glorious fact known to the nobles of Jerusalem in order to rouse their enthusiasm. He had the simplicity of earnestness, the openness of one who forgets self in advocating a great cause. Is not reticence in religion too often a consequence of the habit of turning one's thoughts inward? Such a habit will vanish at the touch of a serious purpose. The man who is in dead earnest has no time to be self-conscious; he does not indulge in sickly reflections on the effect of what he says on other people's opinions about himself; he will not care what they think about him so long as he moves them to do the thing it is laid on his soul to urge upon them. But it is difficult to escape from the selfish subjectivity of modern religion, and recover the grand naturalness of the saints alike of Old and of New Testament times.

After this revelation of the Divine Presence, Nehemiah's second ground of encouragement is of minor interest; it can be but one link in the chain of providential leading. Yet for a man who had not reached his lofty point of view, it would have filled the whole horizon. The king had given permission to the Jews to rebuild the walls; and he had allowed Nehemiah to visit Jerusalem for the very purpose of carrying out the work. This king, Artaxerxes, whose firman had stopped the earlier attempt and even sanctioned the devastating raid of the enemies of the Jews, was now proving himself the friend and champion of Jerusalem! Here was cheering news!

It is not surprising that such a powerful appeal as this of Nehemiah's was successful. It was like the magic horn that awoke the inmates of the enchanted castle. The spell was broken. The long, listless torpor of the Jews gave place to hope and energy, and

the people braced themselves to commence the work. These Jews who had been so lethargic hitherto were now the very men to undertake it. Nehemiah brought no new labourers; but he brought what was better, the one essential requisite for every great enterprise—an inspiration. He brought what the world most needs in every age. We wait for better men to arise and undertake the tasks that seem to be too great for our strength; we cry for a new race of God-sent heroes to accomplish the Herculean labours before which we faint and fail. But we might ourselves become the better men; nay, assuredly we should become God's heroes, if we would but open our hearts to receive the Spirit by the breath of which the weakest are made strong and the most indolent are fired with a Divine energy. To-day, as in the time of Nehemiah, the one supreme need is inspiration.

CHAPTER XIX.

BUILDING THE WALLS.

NEHEMIAH iii.

THE third chapter of the Book of Nehemiah supplies a striking illustration of the constructive character of the history of the Jews in the Persian period. Nor is that all. A mechanical, Chinese industry may be found side by side with indications of moral littleness. But the activity displayed in the restoration of the city walls is more than industrious, more than productive. We must be struck with the breadth of the picture. This characteristic was manifest in the earlier work of building the temple, and it pervades the subsequent religious movement of the shaping of Judaism and the development of The Law. Here it is apparent in the fact that the Jews unite in a great common work for the good of the whole community. It was right and necessary that they should rebuild their private houses ; but though it would appear that some of these houses must have been in a very ruinous condition, for this was the case even with the governor's residence,* the great scheme now set on foot was for the public advantage. There is something almost socialistic about the execution of it ; at all events we meet with that

* Neh. ii. 8.

comprehensiveness of view, that elevation of tone, that sinking of self in the interests of society, which we should look for in true citizenship.

This is the more noteworthy because the object of the Jews in the present undertaking was what is now called "secular." The earlier public building operations carried out by their fathers had been confessedly and formally religious. Zerubbabel and Jeshua had led a band of pilgrims up to Jerusalem for the express purpose of rebuilding the temple, and at first the returned exiles had confined their attention to this work and its associated sacrificial rites, without revealing any political ambition, and apparently without even coveting any civic privileges. Subsequently some sense of citizenship had begun to appear in Ezra's reformation, but every expression of it had been since checked by jealous and hostile influences from without. At length Nehemiah succeeded in rousing the spirit of citizenship by means of the inspiration of religious faith. The new enthusiasm was not directly concerned with the temple; it aimed at fortifying the city. Yet it sprang from prayer and faith. Thus the Jews were feeling their way to that sacredness of civic duties which we in the freer air of Christianity have been so slow to acknowledge.

The special form of this activity in the public interest is also significant. The process of drawing a line round Jerusalem by enclosing it within the definite circuit of a wall helped to mark the individuality and unity of the place as a *city*, which an amorphous congerie of houses could not be, according to the ancient estimate, because the chief distinction between a city and a village was just this, that the city was walled while the village was unwalled. The first privilege enjoyed by

the city would be its security—its strength to withstand assaults. But the walls that shut out foes shut in the citizens—a fact which seems to have been present to the mind of the poet who wrote,—

> "Our feet are standing
> Within thy gates, O Jerusalem;
> Jerusalem, that art builded
> As a city that is compact together." *

The city is "compact together." City life is corporate life. It is not at all easy for us to appreciate this fact while our idea of a city is only represented by a crowd of men, women, and children crammed into a limited space, but with scarcely any sense of common life and aims; still less when we look behind the garish splendour of the streets to the misery and degradation, the disease and famine and vice, that make their nests under the very shadow of wealth and pleasure. Naturally we turn with loathing from such sights, and long for the fresh, quiet country life. But this accidental conglomerate of bricks and human beings is in no sense a city. The true city—such a city as Jerusalem, or Athens, or Rome in its best days—is a focus of the very highest development of life known to man. The word "civilisation" should remind us that it is the city which indicates the difference between the cultivated man and the savage. Originally it was the *civis*, the citizen, who marched in the van of the world's progress. Nor is it difficult to account for his position. Intercommunication of ideas sharpening intelligence—"as iron sharpeneth iron,"—division of labour permitting the specialisation of industry, combination in work making it possible for great undertakings to be carried out, the

* Psalm cxxii. 2, 3.

necessity for mutual considerateness among the members of a community and the consequent development of the social sympathies, all tend to progress. And the sense of a common life realised in this way has weighty moral issues. The larger the social unit becomes, the more will people be freed from pettiness of thought and selfishness of aim. The first step in this direction is made when we regard the family rather than the individual as the true unit. If we pass beyond this in modern times, we commonly advance straight on to the whole nation for our notion of a compact community. But the stride is too great. Very few people are able to reach the patriotism that sinks self in the larger life of a nation. With a Mazzini, and even with smaller men who are magnetised by the passion of such an enthusiast in times of excitement, this may be possible. But with ordinary men in ordinary times it is not very attainable. How many Englishmen leave legacies for the payment of the National Debt? Still more difficult is it to become really cosmopolitan, and acquire a sense of the supreme duty of living for mankind. Our Lord has come to our aid here in giving us a new unit—the Church; so that to be a citizen of this "City of God" is to be called out of the circle of the narrow, selfish interests into the large place where great, common duties and an all-comprehensive good of the whole body are set before us as the chief aims to be pursued.

In rebuilding the city walls, then, Nehemiah was accomplishing two good objects; he was fortifying the place, and he was restoring its organic unity. The two advantages would be mutually helpful, because the weakness of Jerusalem was destroying the peculiar character of her life. The aristocracy, thinking it impossible to preserve the community in isolation, had

encouraged and practised intermarriage with neighbouring people, no doubt from a politic regard to the advantage of foreign alliances. Although Nehemiah was not yet prepared to grapple with this great question, his fortification of Jerusalem would help the citizens to maintain their Jewish separateness, according to the principle that only the strong can be free.

The careful report which Nehemiah has preserved of the organisation of this work shows us how complete it was. The whole circuit of the walls was restored. Of course it was most necessary that nothing less should be attempted, because, like the strength of a chain, the strength of a fortress is limited to that of its weakest part. And yet—obvious as it is—probably most failures, not only in public works, but also in private lives, are directly attributable to the neglect of this elementary principle of defence. The difficulty always is to reach that kind of perfection which is suggested by the circle, rather than the pinnacle—the perfection of completeness. Now in the present instance the completion of the circuit of the walls of Jerusalem testifies to the admirable organising power of Nehemiah, his tact in putting the right men in the right places—the most important and difficult duty of a leader of men, and his perseverance in overcoming the obstacles and objections that must have been thrust in his path—all of them what people call secular qualities, yet all sustained and perfected by a noble zeal and by that transparent unselfishness which is the most powerful solvent of the selfishness of other people. There are more moral qualities involved in the art of organisation than they would suppose who regard it as a hard, mechanical con-

trivance in which human beings are treated like parts of a machine. The highest form of organisation is never attained in that brutal manner. Directly we approach men as persons endowed with rights, convictions, and feelings, an element of sympathy is called for which makes the organising process a much more delicate concern.

Another point calls for remark here. Nehemiah's description of his organisation of the people for the purpose of building the walls links the several groups of men who were responsible for the different parts with their several districts. The method of division shows a devolution of responsibility. Each gang had its own bit of wall or its own gate to see to. The rule regulating the assignment of districts was that, as far as practicable, every man should undertake the work opposite his own house. He was literally to "do the thing that lay nearest" to him in this business. It was in every way a wise arrangement. It would prevent the disorder and vexation that would be excited if people were running about to select favourite sites—choosing the easiest place, or the most prominent, or the safest, or any other desirable spot. Surely there is no principle of organisation so simple or so wise as that which directs us to work near home in the first instance. With the Jews this rule would commend itself to the instinct of self-interest. Nobody would wish the enemy to make a breach opposite his own door, of all places. Therefore the most selfish man would be likely to see to it that the wall near his house was solidly built. If, however, no other inducements had been felt in the end, the work would have failed of any great public good, as all purely selfish work must ultimately fail. There would have been

gaps which it was nobody's interest in particular to fill.

Next it is to be observed that this building was done by "piece work," and that with the names of the workmen attached to it, so that if any of them did their work ill the fact would be known and recorded to their lasting disgrace; but also so that if any put an extra amount of finish on their work this too should be known and remembered to their credit. The idle and negligent workman would willingly be lost in the crowd; but this escape was not to be permitted, he must be dragged out and set in the pillory of notoriety. On the other hand, the humble and devoted citizen would crave no recognition, doing his task lovingly for the sake of his God and his city, feeling that the work was everything—the worker nothing. For his own sake one who labours in this beautiful spirit seems to deserve to be sheltered from the blaze of admiration at the thought of which he shrinks back in dismay. And yet this is not always possible. St. Paul writes of the day when *every* man's work shall be made manifest.* If the honour is really offered to God, who inspires the work, the modesty which leads the human agent to seek the shade may be overstrained, for the servant need not blush to stand in the light when all eyes are directed to his Master. But when honour is offered to the servant also, this may not be without its advantages. Rightly taken it will humble him. He will feel that his unworthiness would not have permitted this if God had not been very gracious to him. Then he will feel also that he has a character to maintain. If it is ruinous to lose a reputation—"the better part of me," as poor

* 1 Cor. iii. 13.

Cassio exclaims in his agony of remorse—it must be helpful to have one to guard from reproach. "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches," * not only because of the indirect advantages it brings from the consideration of the world—its mere purchasing power in the market of human favour; this is its least advantage. Its chief value is in the very possession of it by one whose honour is involved in living worthily of it.

From another point of view the record of the names of people who have rendered good service may be valuable. It will be a stimulus to their successors. The Early Church preserved the names of her confessors and martyrs in the diptychs which were expressly provided for use in public worship, that God might be praised for their noble lives, and that the living might be stimulated to follow their example. Here is one of the great uses of history. We cannot afford to forget the loyal service of the past, because out of it we draw inspiration for the present. The people with a great history have come into a rich heritage. To be a child of a really noble house, to spring from a family truly without reproach—a family all whose sons are pure and all whose daughters are brave—surely this is to receive a high commission to cherish the good name unsullied. As the later Jews gazed at the towers of Jerusalem and marked well her bulwarks, with the thought that this massive strength was the fruit of the toil and sacrifice of their own forefathers—so that the very names of individual ancestors were linked with exact spots on the grey walls—they would hear a call to loyal service worthy of their noble predecessors.

* Prov. xxii. 1.

To proceed, we may observe further that the groups of builders fall into several classes. The first place is given to the priestly order—"the high-priest and his brethren the priests." * This is quite in accordance with the sacerdotal spirit of the times, when the theocracy was emerging into power to take the place left vacant by the decay of the house of David. But the priests are not only named first. Nehemiah states that they were the first to respond to his appeal. "*Then*"—*i.e.*, after he had addressed the assembled Jews—"Then Eliashib the high-priest *rose up*," etc. This man—the grandson of Jeshua, from whom so much was expected by Zechariah—was the first to set his hand to the tremendous task. First in honour, he was first in service. The beauty of his action lies in its silence. Not a word is recorded as spoken by him. But he was not satisfied to sanction the work of humbler men. He led the people in the best possible way, by beginning the work himself, by directly taking upon him his share of it. In this noble simplicity of service Eliashib was followed by the priesthood generally. These men put forth no claims to immunity from the obligation of civic duties or secular occupations. It never occurred to them to object that such employments were in the least degree inconsistent with their high office. The priestly order was hampered by the strictest rules of artificial separation; but the quaint notion—so common in the East, and not quite unknown in the West—that there is something degrading in hard work did not enter into them.

There are two points to be noticed in the special work of the priests. First, *its locality*. These ministers

* Neh. iii. 1.

of the temple set up the "Sheep Gate," which was the gate nearest to the temple. Thus they made themselves responsible for their own quarters, guarding what was especially entrusted to their care. This was in accordance with the plan observed all round the city, that the inhabitants should work in the neighbourhood of their respective houses. The priests, who have the honour of special connection with the temple, feel that a special charge accompanies that honour; and rightly, for responsibility always follows privilege. Second, *its consecration.* The priests "sanctified" their work—*i.e.*, they dedicated it to God. This was not in the sacred enclosure—the *Haram*, as it is now called. Nevertheless, their gate and wall, as well as their temple, were to be reckoned holy. They did not hold the strange modern notion that while the cemetery, the city of the dead, is to be consecrated, the city of the living requires no consecration. They saw that the very stones and timbers of Jerusalem belonged to God, and needed His presence to keep them safe and pure. They were wise, for is He not "the God of the living" and of all the concerns of life?

The next class of workmen is comprised of men who were taken according to their families. These would probably be all of them citizens of Jerusalem, some present by right of birth as descendants of former citizens, others perhaps sprung from the inhabitants of distant towns not yet restored to Israel who had made Jerusalem their home. Their duty to fortify their own city was indubitable.

But now, as in the earlier lists, there is another class among the laity, consisting of the inhabitants of neighbouring towns, who are arranged, not according to families, but according to their residence. Most likely

these men were living in Jerusalem at the time; and yet it is probable that they retained their interest in their provincial localities. But Jerusalem was the capital, the centre of the nation, the Holy City. Therefore the inhabitants of other cities must care for her welfare. In a great scheme of religious centralisation at Jerusalem Josiah had found the best means of establishing unity of worship, and so of impressing upon the worshippers the idea of the unity of God. The same method was still pursued. People were not yet ripe for the larger thoughts of God and His worship which Jesus expressed by Jacob's well. Until that was reached, external unity with a visible centre was essential if a multiplex division of divinity was to be avoided. After these neighbours who thus helped the metropolis we have two other groups—the temple servants and the trade guilds of goldsmiths and merchants.

Now, while on all sides ready volunteers press forward to the work, just one painful exception is found to mar the harmony of the scene, or rather to lessen its volume—for this was found in abstention, not in active opposition. To their shame it is recorded that the nobles of Tekoa "put not their necks to the work of their Lord."* The general body of citizens from this town took part. We are not told why the aristocracy held back. Did they consider the labour beneath their dignity? or was there a breach between them and the townsfolk? The people of Tekoa may have been especially democratic. Ages before, a herdsman from this same town, the rough prophet Amos, had shown little respect for the great ones of the earth. Possibly

* Neh. iii. 5.

the Tekoites had vexed their princes by showing a similar spirit of independence. But if so, Nehemiah would regard their conduct as affording the princes no excuse. For it was the Lord's work that these nobles refused to undertake, and there is no justification for letting God's service suffer when a quarrel has broken out between His servants. Yet how common is this miserable result of divisions among men who should be united in the service of God. Whatever was the cause —whether it was some petty personal offence or some grave difference of opinion—these nobles go down the ages, like those unhappy men in the early days of the Judges who earned the "curse of Meroz," disgraced eternally, for no positive offence, but simply because they left undone what they ought to have done. Nehemiah pronounces no curse. He chronicles the bare fact. But his ominous silence in regard to any explanation is severely condemnatory. The man who builds his house on the sand in hearing Christ's words and doing them not, the servant who is beaten with many stripes because he knows his lord's will and does not perform it, that other servant who buries his talent, the virgins who forget to fill their vessels with oil, the people represented by goats on the left hand whose sole ground of accusation is that they refused to exercise the common charities—all these illustrate the important but neglected truth that our Lord's most frequent words of condemnation were expressed for what we call negative evil—the evil of harmless but useless lives.

Happily we may set exceptional devotion in another quarter over against the exceptional remissness of the nobles of Tekoa. Brief as is his summary of the division of the work, Nehemiah is careful to slip in

a word of praise for one Baruch the son of Zabbai, saying that this man "*earnestly* repaired" his portion.* That one word "earnestly" is a truer stamp of worth than all the honours claimed by the abstaining nobles on grounds of rank or pedigree; it goes down the centuries as the patent of true nobility in the realm of industry.

* Neh. iii. 20.

CHAPTER XX.

"MARK YE WELL HER BULWARKS."

NEHEMIAH iii.

THE Book of Nehemiah is our principal authority for the ancient topography of Jerusalem. But, as we have been already reminded, the sieges from which the city has suffered, and the repeated destruction of its walls and buildings, have obliterated many of the old landmarks beyond recovery. In some places the ground is now found to be raised sixty feet above the original surface; and in one spot it was even necessary to dig down a hundred and twenty feet to reach the level of the old pavement. It is therefore not at all wonderful that the attempt to identify the sites here named should have occasioned not a little perplexity. Still the explorations of underground Jerusalem have brought some important facts to light, and others can be fairly divined from a consideration of the historical record in the light of the more general features of the country, which no wars or works of man can alter.

The first, because the most obvious, thing to be noted in considering the site of Jerusalem is its mountainous character. Jerusalem is a mountain city, as high as a Dartmoor tor, some two thousand feet above the Mediterranean, with a drop of nearly four thousand feet on the farther side, beyond the Mount of Olives,

towards the deep pit where the Dead Sea steams in tropical heat. Looked at from the wilderness, through a gap in the hills round Bethlehem, she soars above us, with her white domes and towers clean-cut against the burning sky, like a city of clouds. In spite of the blazing southern sunshine, the air bites keenly on that fine altitude. It would be only reasonable to suppose that the vigour of the highlanders who dwelt in Jerusalem was braced by the very atmosphere of their home. And yet we have had to trace every impulse of zeal and energy after the restoration to the relaxing plains of the Euphrates and the Tigris! In all history the moral element counts for more than the material. Race is more than *habitat*; and religion is more than race.

Closely associated with this mountainous character of Jerusalem is a second feature. It is clear that the site for the city was chosen because of its singularly valuable ready-made defences. Jerusalem is a natural fortress. Protected on three sides by deep ravines, it would seem that she could be easily made impregnable. How awful, then, is the irony of her destiny! This city, so rarely favoured by nature for security against attack, has been more often assaulted and captured, and has suffered more of the horrors of war, than any other spot on earth.

The next fact to be noticed is the small size of Jerusalem. The dimensions of the city have varied in different ages. Under the Herods the buildings extended far beyond the ancient limits, and villas were dotted about on the outlying hills. But in Nehemiah's day the city was confined within a surprisingly contracted area. The discovery of the "Siloam inscription," leading to the identification of the gorge known to the

Romans as the *Tyropœon* with the ancient "Valley of Hinnom" or "Tophet," cuts off the whole of the modern Zion from the site of the ancient city, and points to the conclusion that the old Zion must have been nearer Moriah, and all Jerusalem crowded in the little space to the east of the chasm which was once thought to have run up through the middle of the city. No doubt the streets were narrow; the houses may have been high. Still the population was but slender, for after the walls had been built Nehemiah found the space he had enclosed too large for the inhabitants.* But our interest in Jerusalem is in no way determined by her size, or by the number of her citizens. A little town in a remote province, she was politically insignificant enough when viewed from the standpoint of Babylon, and in comparison with the many rich and populous cities of the vast Persian dominions. It is the more remarkable, then, that successive Persian sovereigns should have bestowed rare favours on her. From the day when Solomon built his temple, the unique glory of this city had begun to appear. Josiah's reformation in concentrating the national worship at Jerusalem advanced her peculiar privileges, which the rebuilding of the temple before the restoration of the city further promoted. Jerusalem is the religious metropolis of the world. To be first in religious honour it was not necessary that she should be spacious or populous. Size and numbers count for very little in religion. Its valuation is qualitative, not quantitative. Even the extent of its influence, even the size and mass of this, depends mainly on its character. Moreover, in Jerusalem, as a rule, the really effective religious life

* Neh. xi. 1.

was confined to a small group of the "pious"; sometimes it was gathered up in a single individual—a Jeremiah, an Ezra, a Nehemiah. This is a fact replete with encouragement for faith. It is an instance of the way in which God chooses the weak things—weak as to this world—to confound the strong. If a small city could once take the unique position held by Jerusalem, then why should not a small Church now? And if a little knot of earnest men within the city could be the nucleus of her character and the source of her influence, why should not quite a small group of earnest people give a character to their Church, and, through the Church, work wonders in the world, as the grain of mustard seed could move a mountain? The secret of the miracle is, like the secret of nature, that God is in the city and the Church, as God is in the seed. When once we have discovered this truth as a certain fact of life and history, our estimate of the relative greatness of things is revolutionised. The map and the census then cease to answer our most pressing questions. The excellence we look for must be spiritual—vigour of faith, self-abnegation of love, passion of zeal.

As we follow Nehemiah round the circuit of the walls the more special features of the city are brought under our notice. He begins with the "Sheep Gate," which was evidently near the temple, and the construction of which was undertaken by the priests as the first piece of work in the great enterprise. The name of this gate agrees well with its situation. Opening on the Valley of the Kidron, and facing the Mount of Olives and the lonely pass over the hills towards Jericho, it would be the gate through which shepherds would bring in their flocks from the wide pasturage of the wilderness. Possibly there was a market at the open space just

inside. The vicinity of the temple would make it easy to bring up the victims for the sacrifices by this way. As the Passover season approached, the whole neighbourhood would be alive with the bleating of thousands of lambs. Rich associations would thus cluster round the name of this gate. It would be suggestive of the pastoral life so much pursued by the men of Judah, whose favourite king had been a shepherd lad; and it would call up deeper thoughts of the mystery of sacrifice and the joy of the Paschal redemption of Israel. To us Christians the situation of the "Sheep Gate" has a far more touching significance. It seems to have stood near where the "St. Stephen's Gate" now stands; here, then, would be the way most used by our Lord in coming to and fro between Jerusalem and Bethany, the way by which He went out to Gethsemane on the last night, and probably the way by which He was brought back "as a sheep" among her shearers, "as a lamb" led to the slaughter.

Going round from this spot northwards, we have the part of the wall built by the men of Jericho, which would still look east, towards their own city, so that they would always see their work when they got their first glimpse of Jerusalem as they passed over the ridge of the Mount of Olives on their pilgrimages up to the feasts. The task of the men of Jericho ended at one of the northern gates, the construction of which, together with the fitting of its ponderous bolts and bars, was considered enough for another group of builders. This was called the "Fish Gate." Since it faced north, it would scarcely have been used by the traders who came up from the sea fisheries in the Mediterranean; it must have received the fish supply from the Jordan, and perhaps from as far as the Sea of Galilee. Still its

name suggests a wider range of commerce than the "Sheep Gate," which let in flocks chiefly from neighbouring hills. Jerusalem was in a singularly isolated spot for the capital of a country, one chosen expressly on account of its inaccessibility—the very opposite requisite from that of most capitals, which are planted by navigable rivers. Nevertheless she maintained communication, both political and commercial, with distant towns all along the ages of her chequered history.

After passing the work of one or two Jewish families and that of the Tekoites, memorable for the painful fact of the abstention of the nobles, we come to the "Old Gate." That a gate should bear such a name would lead us to think that once gates had not been so numerous as they were at this time. Yet most probably the "Old Gate" was really new, because very little of the original city remained above ground. But men love to perpetuate memories of the past. Even what is new in fact may acquire a flavour of age by the force of association. The wise reformer will follow the example of Nehemiah in linking the new on to the old, and preserving the venerable associations of antiquity wherever these do not hinder present efficiency.

Next we come to the work of men from the northern Benjamite towns of Gibeon and Mizpah,* whose volunteer service was a mark of their own brotherly spirit. It should be remembered, however, that Jerusalem originally belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. Working at the northern wall, in accordance with the rule observed throughout that all the Jews from outlying places should build in the direction of their own cities, these Benjamites carried it on as far as the districts of the

* Neh. iii. 7.

goldsmiths and apothecaries,* whose principal bazaars seem to have occupied the north quarter of the city—the quarter most suitable for trade, because first reached by most travellers. There, however—if we are to accept the generally received emendation of the text mentioned in the margin of the Revised Version—they found a bit of wall that had escaped destruction, and also probably the "Ephraim Gate," which is not named here, although it existed in the days of Nehemiah.† Inasmuch as the invasions had come from the north, and the recent Samaritan raid had also proceeded from the same quarter, it seems likely that the city had been taken on this side. If so, the enemy, after having got in through a gate which they had burnt, or through a breach in the wall, did not think it necessary to waste time in the heavy labour of tearing down the wall in their rear. Perhaps as this was the most exposed quarter, the wall was most solid here—it was known as "the *broad* wall." The wealthy goldsmiths would have been anxious that their bazaars should not be the first parts of the city to entertain a marauding host through any weakness in the defences. The next bit of wall was in the hands of a man of some importance, known as "the ruler of half the district of Jerusalem";‡ *i.e.*, he had the management of half the land belonging to the city—either a sort of police supervision of private estates, or the direct control of land owned by the municipality, and possibly farmed for the time being on communal principles.

Still following the northern wall, we pass the work of several Jerusalem families, and so on to the potteries, as we may infer from the remark about "the tower

* Neh. iii. 8. † Neh. viii. 16. ‡ Neh. iii. 9.

of the *furnaces*."* Here we must be at the "Corner Gate," † which, however, is not now named; "the tower of the furnaces" may have been part of its fortifications. Evidently this was an important position. The manager of the second half of the city estates and the villages on them—known as "his daughters"—had the charge of the work here. It was four hundred cubits from the "Ephraim Gate" to the corner.‡ At this point the long north wall ends, and the fortifications take a sharp turn southwards. Following the new direction, we pass by the course of the Valley of Hinnom, leaving it on our right. The next gate we meet is named after this ravine of evil omen the "Valley Gate." It would be here that the poor children, victims to the savage Moloch worship, had been led out to their fate. The name of the gate would be a perpetual reminder of the darkest passage in the old city's history of sin and shame. The gate would face west, and, in accordance with the arrangement throughout, the inhabitants of Zanoah, a town lying out from Jerusalem ten miles in that direction, undertook the erection of it. They also had charge of a thousand cubits of wall—an exceptionally long piece; but the gates were fewer on this side, and here possibly the steepness of the cliff rendered a slighter wall sufficient.

This long, unbroken stretch of wall ends at the "Dung Gate," through which the refuse of the city was flung out to the now degraded valley which once had been so famous for its pleasure gardens. Sanitary regulations are of course most necessary. We admire the minuteness with which they are attended to in the Pentateuch,

* Neh. iii. 11.

† 2 Chron. xxvi. 9; Jer. xxxi. 38.

‡ 2 Kings xiv. 13.

and we regard the filthy condition of modern eastern cities as a sign of neglect and decay. Still the adornment of a grand gateway by the temple, or the solid building of a noble approach to the city along the main route from the north, would be a more popular undertaking than this construction of a "Dung Gate." It is to the credit of Nehemiah's admirable skill in organisation that no difficulty was found in filling up the less attractive parts of his programme, and it is even more to the credit of those who accepted the allotment of them that, as far as we know, they made no complaint. A common zeal for the public good overcame personal prejudices. The just and firm application of a universal rule is a great preventative of complaints in such a case. When the several bands of workers were to undertake the districts opposite their own houses if they were inhabitants of the city, or opposite their own towns if they were provincial Jews, it would be difficult for any of them to frame a complaint. The builders of the "Dung Gate" came, it would seem, from the most conspicuous eminence in the wilderness of Southern Judæa—that now known as the "Frank Mountain." The people who would take to such an out-of-the-world place of abode would hardly be such as we should look to for work requiring fineness of finish. Perhaps they were more suited to the unpretentious task which fell to their lot. Still this consideration does not detract from the credit of their good-natured acquiescence, for self-seeking people are the last to admit that they are not fit for the best places.

The next gate was in a very interesting position at the south-west corner, where the *Tyropœon* runs down to the Valley of the Kidron. It was called the "Fountain Gate," perhaps after the one natural spring

which Jerusalem possesses—that now known as the "Virgin's Fountain," and near to the Pool of Siloam, where the precious water from this spring was stored. The very name of the gate would call up thoughts of the value of its site in times of siege, when the fountain had to be "sealed" or covered over, to save it from being tampered with by the enemy. Close by is a flight of steps, still extant, that formerly led down to the king's garden. We are now near to Zion, in what was once the favourite and most aristocratic portion of the town. The lowering of the top of Zion in the time of the Maccabees, that it might not overlook the temple on Mount Moriah, and the filling up of the ravines, considerably detract from the once imposing height of this quarter of the city. Here ancient Jerusalem had looked superb—like an eagle perched on a rock. With such a fortress as Zion her short-sighted citizens had thought her impregnable; but Nehemiah's contemporaries were humbler and wiser men than the infatuated Jews who had rejected the warnings of Jeremiah.

The adjoining piece of wall brings us round to the tombs of the kings, which, according to the custom of antiquity, as we learn from a cuneiform inscription at Babylon, were within the city walls, although the tombs of less important people were outside—just as to this day we bury our illustrious dead in the heart of the metropolis. Nehemiah had been moved at the first report of the ruin of Jerusalem by the thought that his fathers' sepulchres were there.

From this spot it is not so easy to trace the remainder of the wall. The mention of the Levites has given rise to the opinion that Nehemiah now takes us at once to the temple again; but this is hardly possible in view

of his subsequent statements. We must first work round by Ophel, the "Water," the "East," and the "Horse" Gates—all of them apparently leading out towards the Valley of the Kidron. Levites and Priests, whose quarters we are gradually approaching, and other inhabitants of houses in this district, together with people from the Jordan Valley and the east country, carried out this last piece of work as far as a great tower standing out between Ophel and the corner of the temple wall, a tower so massive that some of its masonry can be seen still standing. But the narrative is here so obscure, and the sites have been so altered by the ravages of war and time, that the identification of most of them in this direction baffles inquiry.

"Mark ye well her bulwarks." Alas! they are buried in a desolation so huge that the utmost skill of engineering science fails to trace their course. The latest great discovery, which has simply revolutionised the map by identifying the *Tyropœon* with the Old Testament "Valley of Hinnom" or "Tophet," is the most striking sign of these topographical difficulties. The valley itself has been filled up with masses of rubbish, the sight of which to-day confirms the dreadful tragedy of the history of Jerusalem, the most tragic history on record. No city was ever more favoured by Heaven, and no city was ever more afflicted. Hers were the most magnificent endowments, the highest ideals, the fairest promises; hers too was the most miserable failure. Her beauty ravaged, her sanctity defiled, her light extinguished, her joy turned into bitterness, Heaven's bride has been treated as the scum of the streets. And now, after being abused by her own children, shattered by the Babylonian, outraged by the Syrian, demolished by the Roman, the city which

stoned her prophets and clamoured successfully for the death of her Saviour has again revived in poverty and misery—the pale ghost of her past, still the victim of the oppressor. The witchery of this wonderful city fascinates us to-day, and the very syllables of her name "JERUSALEM" sound strangely sweet and ineffably sad—

"Most musical, most melancholy."

It was fitting that the tenderest, most mournful lament ever uttered should have been called forth by our Lord's contemplation of such a city—a city which, deeming herself destined to be the joy of all the earth, became the plague-spot of history.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON GUARD.

NEHEMIAH ii. 10, 19; iv.

ALL his arrangements for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem show that Nehemiah was awake to the dangers with which he was surrounded. The secrecy of his night ride was evidently intended to prevent a premature revelation of his plans. The thorough organisation, the mapping out of the whole line of the wall, and the dividing of the building operations among forty-two bands of workpeople, secured equal and rapid progress on all sides. Evidently the idea was to "rush" the work, and to have it fairly well advanced, so as to afford a real protection for the citizens, before any successful attempts to frustrate it could be carried out. Even with all these precautions, Nehemiah was harassed and hindered for a time by the malignant devices of his enemies. It was only to be expected that he would meet with opposition. But a few years before all the Syrian colonists had united in extracting an order from Artaxerxes for the arrest of the earlier work of building the walls, because the Jews had made themselves intensely obnoxious to their neighbours by sending back the wives they had married from among the Gentile peoples. The jealousy of Samaria, which had taken the lead in Palestine so long as Jerusalem was in

evidence, envenomed this animosity still more. Was it likely then that her watchful foes would hear with equanimity of the revival of the hated city—a city which must have seemed to them the very embodiment of the anti-social spirit ?

Now, however, since a favourite servant of the Great King had been appointed governor of Jerusalem, the Satrap of the Syrian provinces could scarcely be expected to interfere. Therefore the initiative fell into the hands of smaller men, who found it necessary to abandon the method of direct hostility, and to proceed by means of intrigues and ambuscades. There were three who made themselves notorious in this undignified course of procedure. Two of them are mentioned in connection with the journey of Nehemiah up to Jerusalem.* The first, the head of the whole opposition, is Sanballat, who is called the Horonite, seemingly because he is a native of one of the Beth-horons, and who appears to be the governor of the city of Samaria, although this is not stated. Throughout the history he comes before us repeatedly as the foe of the rival governor of Jerusalem. Next to him comes Tobiah, a chief of the little trans-Jordanic tribe of the Ammonites, some of whom had got into Samaria in the strange mixing up of peoples after the Babylonian conquest. He is called the servant, possibly because he once held some post at court, and if so he may have been personally jealous of Nehemiah's promotion.

Sanballat and his supporter Tobiah were subsequently joined by an Arabian Emir named Geshem. His presence in the group of conspirators would be surprising if we had not been unexpectedly supplied

* Neh. ii. 10.

with the means of accounting for it in the recently deciphered inscription which tells how Sargon imported an Arabian colony into Samaria. The Arab would scent prey in the project of a warlike expedition.

The opposition proceeded warily. At first we are only told that when Sanballat and his friend Tobiah heard of the coming of Nehemiah, "it grieved them exceedingly that there was come a man to seek the welfare of the children of Israel."* In writing these caustic words Nehemiah implies that the jealous men had no occasion to fear that he meant any harm to them, and that they knew this. It seems very hard to him, then, that they should begrudge any alleviation of the misery of the poor citizens of Jerusalem. What was that to them? Jealousy might foresee the possibility of future loss from the recovery of the rival city, and in this they might find the excuse for their action, an excuse for not anticipating which so fervent a patriot as Nehemiah may be forgiven; nevertheless the most greedy sense of self-interest on the part of these men is lost sight of in the virulence of their hatred to the Jews. This is always the case with that cruel infatuation—the Anti-Semitic rage. Here it is that hatred passes beyond mere anger. Hatred is actually pained at the welfare of its object. It suffers from a Satanic misery. The venom which it fails to plant in its victim rankles in its own breast.

At first we only hear of this odious distress of the jealous neighbours. But the prosecutions of Nehemiah's designs immediately lead to a manifestation of open hostility—verbal in the beginning. No sooner had the Jews made it evident that they were responsive to

* Neh. ii. 10.

their leader's appeal and intended to rise and build, than they were assailed with mockery. The Samaritan and Ammonite leaders were now joined by the Arabian, and together they sent a message of scorn and contempt, asking the handful of poor Jews whether they were fortifying the city in order to rebel against the king. The charge of a similar intention had been the cause of stopping the work on the previous occasion.* Now that Artaxerxes' favourite cup-bearer was at the head of affairs, any suspicion of treason was absurd; but since hatred is singularly blind—far more blind than love—it is barely possible that the malignant mockers hoped to raise a suspicion. On the other hand, there is no evidence to show that they followed the example of the previous opposition and reported to headquarters. For the present they seem to have contented themselves with bitter raillery. This is a weapon before which weak men too often give way. But Nehemiah was not so foolish as to succumb beneath a shower of poor, ill-natured jokes.

His answer is firm and dignified.† It contains three assertions. The first is the most important. Nehemiah is not ashamed to confess the faith which is the source of all his confidence. In the eyes of men the Jews may appear but a feeble folk, quite unequal to the task of holding their ground in the midst of a swarm of angry foes. If Nehemiah had only taken account of the political and military aspects of affairs, he might have shrunk from proceeding. But it is just the mark of his true greatness that he always has his eye fixed on a Higher Power. He knows that God is in the project, and therefore he is sure that it must prosper. When a

* Ezra iv. 13. † Neh. ii. 20.

man can reach this conviction, mockery and insult do not move him. He has climbed to a serene altitude, from which he can look down with equanimity on the boiling clouds that are now far beneath his feet. Having this sublime ground of confidence, Nehemiah is able to proceed to his second point—his assertion of the determination of the Jews to arise and build. This is quite positive and absolute. The brave man states it, too, in the clearest possible language. Now the work is about to begin there is to be no subterfuge or disguise. Nehemiah's unflinching determination is based on the religious confession that precedes it. The Jews are God's servants; they are engaged in His work; they know He will prosper them; therefore they most certainly will not stay their hand for all the gibes and taunts of their neighbours. Lastly, Nehemiah contemptuously repudiates the claim of these impertinent intruders to interfere in the work of the Jews; he tells them that they have no excuse for their meddling, for they own no property in Jerusalem, they have no right of citizenship or of control from without, and there are no tombs of *their* ancestors in the sacred city.

In this message of Nehemiah's we seem to hear an echo of the old words with which the temple-builders rejected the offer of assistance from the Samaritans, and which were the beginning of the whole course of jealous antagonism on the part of the irritated neighbours. But the circumstances are entirely altered. It is not a friendly offer of co-operation, but its very opposite, a hostile and insulting message designed to hinder the Jews, that is here so proudly resented. In the reply of Nehemiah we hear the Church refusing to bend to the will of the world, because the world has no right to trespass on her territory. God's work is not to be

tampered with by insolent meddlers. Jewish exclusiveness is painfully narrow, at least in our estimation of it, when it refuses to welcome strangers or to recognise the good that lies outside the sacred enclosure; but this same characteristic becomes a noble quality, with high ethical and religious aims, when it firmly refuses to surrender its duty to God at the bidding of the outside world. The Christian can scarcely imitate Nehemiah's tone and temper in this matter; and yet if he is loyal to his God he will feel that he must be equally decided and uncompromising in declining to give up any part of what he believes to be his service of Christ to please men who unhappily as yet have "no part, or right, or memorial" in the New Jerusalem; although, unlike the Jew of old, he will be only too glad that all men should come in and share his privileges.

After receiving an annoying answer it was only natural that the antagonistic neighbours of the Jews should be still more embittered in their animosity. At the first news of his coming to befriend the children of Israel, as Nehemiah says, Sanballat and Tobiah were grieved; but when the building operations were actually in process the Samaritan leader passed from vexation to rage—"he was wroth and took great indignation." * This man now assumed the lead in opposition to the Jews. His mockery became more bitter and insulting. In this he was joined by his friend the Ammonite, who declared that if only one of the foxes that prowl on the neighbouring hills were to jump upon the wall the creature would break it down.† Perhaps he had received a hint from some of his spies that the new work that had been so hastily pressed forward was not

* Neh. iv. 1. † Neh. iv. 3.

any too solid. The "Palestine Exploration Fund" has brought to light the foundations of what is believed to be a part of Nehemiah's wall at Ophel, and the base of it is seen to be of rubble, not founded on the rock, but built on the clay above, so that it has been possible to drive a mine under it from one side to the other—a rough piece of work, very different from the beautifully finished temple walls.*

Nehemiah met the renewed shower of insults in a startling manner. He cursed his enemies.† Deploring before God the contempt that was heaped on the Jews, he prayed that the reproach of the enemies might be turned on their own head, devoted them to the horrors of a new captivity, and even went so far as to beg that no atonement might be found for their iniquity, that their sin might not be blotted out. In a word, instead of himself forgiving his enemies, he besought that they might not be forgiven by God. We shudder as we read his terrible words. This is not the Christ spirit. It is even contrary to the less merciful spirit of the Old Testament. Yet, to be just to Nehemiah, we must consider the whole case. It is most unfair to tear his curse out of the history and gibbet it as a specimen of Jewish piety. Even strong men who will not give way before ridicule may feel its stabs—for strength is not inconsistent with sensitiveness. Evidently Nehemiah was irritated; but then he was much provoked. For the moment he lost his self-possession. We must remember that the strain of his great undertaking was most exhausting, and we must be patient with the utterances of one so sorely tried. If lethargic people criticise adversely the hasty utterances of a more

* Conder, "Bible Geography," p. 131. † Neh. iv. 4.

intense nature, they forget that, though they may never lose their self-control, neither do they ever rouse themselves to the daring energy of the man whose failings they blame. Then it was not any personal insults hurled against himself that Nehemiah resented so fiercely. It was his work that the Samaritans were trying to hinder. This he believed to be really God's work, so that the insults offered to the Jews were also directed against God, who must have been angry also. We cannot justify the curse by the standard of the Christian law; but it is not reasonable to apply that standard to it. We must set it by the side of the Maledictory Psalms. From the standpoint of its author it can be fully accounted for. To say that even in this way it can be defended, however, is to go too far. We have no occasion to persuade ourselves that any of the Old Testament saints were immaculate, even in the light of Judaism. Nehemiah was a great and good man, yet he was not an Old Testament Christ.

But now more serious opposition was to be encountered. Such enemies as those angry men of Samaria were not likely to be content with venting their spleen in idle mockery. When they saw that the keenest shafts of their wit failed to stop the work of the citizens of Jerusalem, Sanballat and his friends found it necessary to proceed to more active measures, and accordingly they entered into a conspiracy for the double purpose of carrying on actual warfare and of intriguing with disaffected citizens of Jerusalem—"to cause confusion therein." * Nehemiah was too observant and penetrating a statesman not to become aware of what was going on; the knowledge that the

* Neh. iv. 8, 11.

plots existed revealed the extent of his danger, and compelled him to make active preparations for thwarting them. We may notice several important points in the process of the defence.

1. *Prayer.*—This was the first, and in Nehemiah's mind the most essential defensive measure. We find him resorting to it in every important juncture of his life. It is his sheet-anchor. But now he uses the plural number. Hitherto we have met only with his private prayers. In the present case he says, "*We* made *our* prayer unto *our* God." * Had the infection of his prayerful spirit reached his fellow-citizens, so that they now shared it? Was it that the imminence of fearful danger drove to prayer men who under ordinary circumstances forgot their need of God? Or were both influences at work? However it was brought about, this association in prayer of some of the Jews with their governor must have been the greatest comfort to him, as it was the best ground for the hope that God would not now let them fall into the hands of the enemy. Hitherto there had been a melancholy solitariness about the earnest devotion of Nehemiah. The success of his mission began to show itself when the citizens began to participate in the same spirit of devotion.

2. *Watchfulness.*—Nehemiah was not the fanatic to blunder into the delusion that prayer was a substitute for duty, instead of being its inspiration. All that followed the prayer was really based upon it. The calmness, hope, and courage won in the high act of communion with God made it possible to take the necessary steps in the outer world. Since the greatest

* Neh. iv. 9.

danger was not expected as an open assault, it was most necessary that an unbroken watch should be maintained, day and night. Nehemiah had spies out in the surrounding country, who reported to him every planned attack. So thorough was this system of espionage, that though no less than ten plots were concocted by the enemy, they were all discovered to Nehemiah, and all frustrated by him.

3. *Encouragement.*—The Jews were losing heart. The men of Judah came to Nehemiah with the complaint that the labourers who were at work on the great heaps of rubbish were suffering from exhaustion. The reduction in the numbers of workmen, owing to the appointment of the guard, would have still further increased the strain of those who were left to toil among the mounds. But it would have been fatal to draw back at this juncture. That would have been to invite the enemy to rush in and complete the discomfiture of the Jews. On Nehemiah came the obligation of cheering the dispirited citizens. Even the leading men, who should have rallied the people, like officers at the head of their troops, shared the general depression. Nehemiah was again alone—or at best supported by the silent sympathy of his companions in prayer. There was very nearly a panic; and for one man to stand out under such circumstances as these in solitary courage, not only resisting the strong contagion of fear, but stemming the tide and counteracting its movement, this would be indeed the sublimity of heroism. It was a severe test for Nehemiah; and he came out of it triumphant. His faith was the inspiration of his own courage, and it became the ground for the encouragement of others. He addressed the people and their nobles in a spirited appeal. First, he

exhorted them to banish fear. The very tone of his voice must have been reassuring; the presence of one brave man in a crowd of cowards often shames them out of their weakness. But Nehemiah proceeded to give reasons for his encouragement. Let the men remember their God Jehovah, how great and terrible He is! The cause is His, and His might and terror will defend it. Let them think of their people and their families, and fight for brethren and children, for wives and homes! Cowardice is unbelief and selfishness combined. Trust in God and a sense of duty to others will master the weakness.

4. *Arms.*—Nehemiah gave the first place to the spiritual and moral defences of Jerusalem. Yet his material defences were none the less thorough on account of his prayers to God or his eloquent exhortation of the people and their leaders. They were most complete.

His arrangements for the military protection of Jerusalem converted the whole city into an armed camp. Half the citizens in turn were to leave their work, and stand at arms with swords and spears and bows. Even in the midst of the building operations the clatter of weapons was heard among the stones, because the masons at work on the walls and the labourers while they poised on their heads baskets full of rubbish from the excavations had swords attached to their sashes. Residents of the suburbs were required to stay in the city instead of returning home for the night, and no man could put off a single article of clothing when he lay down to sleep. Nor was this martial array deemed sufficient without some special provision against a surprise. Nehemiah therefore went about with a trumpeter, ready to summon all hands to any point of danger on the first alarm.

Still, though the Jews were hampered with these preparations for battle, tired with toil and watching, and troubled by dreadful apprehensions, the work went on. This is a great proof of the excellency of Nehemiah's generalship. He did not sacrifice the building to the fighting. The former was itself designed to produce a permanent defence, while the arms were only for temporary use. When the walls were up the citizens could give the laugh back to their foes. But in itself the very act of working was reassuring. Idleness is a prey to fears which industry has no time to entertain. Every man who tries to do his duty as a servant of God is unconsciously building a wall about himself that will be his shelter in the hour of peril.

CHAPTER XXII.

USURY.

NEHEMIAH V.

WE open the fifth chapter of "Nehemiah" with a shock of pain. The previous chapter described a scene of patriotic devotion in which nearly all the people were united for the prosecution of one great purpose. There we saw the priests and the wealthy citizens side by side with their humble brethren engaged in the common task of building the walls of Jerusalem and guarding the city against assault. The heartiness with which the work was first undertaken, the readiness of all classes to resume it after temporary discouragements, and the martial spirit shown by the whole population in standing under arms in the prosecution of it, determined to resist any interference from without, were all signs of a large-minded zeal in which we should have expected private interests to have given place to the public necessities of the hour. But now we are compelled to look at the seamy side of city life. In the midst of the unavoidable toils and dangers occasioned by the animosity of the Samaritans, miserable internal troubles had broken out among the Jews; and the perplexing problems which seem to be inseparable from the gathering together of a number of people under any known past or present social system

had developed in the most acute form. The gulf between the rich and the poor had widened ominously; for while the poor had been driven to the last extremity, their more fortunate fellow-citizens had taken a monstrously cruel advantage of their helplessness. Famine-stricken men and women not only cried to Nehemiah for the means of getting corn for themselves and their families; they had a complaint to make against their brethren. Some had lost their lands after mortgaging them to rich Jews. Others had even been forced by the money-lenders to sell their sons and daughters into slavery. They must have been on the brink of starvation before resorting to such an unnatural expedient. How wonderfully, then, do they exhibit the patience of the poor in their endurance of these agonies! There were no bread-riots. The people simply appealed to Nehemiah, who had already proved himself their disinterested friend, and who, as governor, was responsible for the welfare of the city.

It is not difficult to see how it came about that many of the citizens of Jerusalem were in this desperate plight. In all probability most of Zerubbabel's and Ezra's pilgrims had been in humble circumstances. It is true successive expeditions had gone up with contributions to the Jerusalem colony; but most of the stores they had conveyed had been devoted to public works, and even anything that may have been distributed among the citizens could only have afforded temporary relief. War utterly paralyses industry and commerce. In Judæa the unsettled state of the country must have seriously impeded agricultural and pastoral occupations. Then the importation of corn into Jerusalem would be almost impossible while roving enemies were on the watch in the open country, so that

the price of bread would rise as a result of scarcity. At the same time the presence of persons from the outlying towns would increase the number of mouths to be fed within the city. Moreover, the attention given to the building of the walls and the defence of Jerusalem from assault would prevent artisans and tradesmen from following the occupations by which they usually earned their living. Lastly, the former governors had impoverished the population by exacting grievously heavy tribute. The inevitable result of all this was debt and its miserable consequences.

Just as in the early history of Athens and later at Rome, the troubles to the state arising from the condition of the debtors were now of the most serious character. Nothing disorganises society more hopelessly than bad arrangements with respect to debts and poverty. Nehemiah was justly indignant when the dreadful truth was made known to him. We may wonder why he had not discovered it earlier, since he had been going in and out among the people. Was there a certain aloofness in his attitude? His lonely night ride suggests something of the kind. In any case his absorbing devotion to his one task of rebuilding the city walls could have left him little leisure for other interests. The man who is engaged in a grand scheme for the public good is frequently the last to notice individual cases of need. The statesman is in danger of ignoring the social condition of the people in the pursuit of political ends. It used to be the mistake of most governments that their foreign policy absorbed their attention to the neglect of home interests.

Nehemiah was not slow in recognising the public need, when it was brought under his notice by the cry of

the distressed debtors. According to the truly modern custom of his time in Jerusalem, he called a public meeting, explained the whole situation, and appealed to the creditors to give back the mortgaged lands and remit the interest on their loans. This was agreed to at once, the popular conscience evidently approving of the proposal. Nehemiah, however, was not content to let the matter rest here. He called the priests, and put them on their oath to see that the promise of the creditors was carried out. This appeal to the priesthood is very significant. It shows how rapidly the government was tending towards a sacerdotal theocracy. But it is important to notice that it was a social and not a purely political matter in which Nehemiah looked to the priests. The social order of the Jews was more especially bound up with their religion, or rather with their law and its regulations, while as yet questions of quasi-foreign policy were freely relegated to the purely civil authorities, the heads of families, the nobles, and the supreme governor under the Persian administration.

Nehemiah followed the example of the ancient prophets in his symbolical method of denouncing any of the creditors who would not keep the promise he had extracted from them. Shaking out his mantle, as though to cast off whatever had been wrapped in its folds, he exclaimed, "So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise; even thus be he shaken out, and emptied." * This was virtually a threat of confiscation and excommunication. Yet the *Ecclesia* gladly assented, crying "Amen" and praising the Lord.

The extreme position here taken up by Nehemiah

* Neh. v. 13.

and freely conceded by the people may seem to us unreasonable unless we have considered all the circumstances. Nehemiah denounced the conduct of the money-lenders as morally wrong. "The thing that ye do is not good," he said. It was opposed to the will of God. It provoked the reproach of the heathen. It was very different from his own conduct, in redeeming captives and supporting the poor out of his private means. Now, wherein was the real evil of the conduct of these creditors? The primitive law of the "Covenant" forbad the Jews to take interest for loans among their brethren.* But why so? Is there not a manifest convenience in the arrangements by which those people who possess a superfluity may lend to those who are temporarily embarrassed? If no interest is to be paid for such loans, is it to be expected that rich people will run the risk and put themselves to the certain inconvenience they involve? The man who saves generally does so in order that his savings may be of advantage to him. If he consents to defer the enjoyment of them, must not this be for some consideration? In proportion as the advantages of saving are reduced the inducements to save will be diminished, and then the available lending fund of the community will be lessened, so that fewer persons in need of temporary accommodation will be able to receive it. From another point of view, may it not be urged that if a man obtains the assistance of a loan he should be as willing to pay for it as he would be to pay for any other distinct advantage? He does not get the convenience of a coach-ride for nothing: why should he not expect to pay anything for a lift along a difficult bit of his financial course? Sometimes

* Exod. xxii. 25.

a loan may be regarded as an act of partnership. The tradesman who has not sufficient capital to carry on his business borrows from a neighbour who possesses money which he desires to invest. Is not this an arrangement in which lending at interest is mutually advantageous? In such a case the lender is really a sort of "sleeping partner," and the interest he receives is merely his share in the business, because it is the return which has come back to him through the use of his money. Where is the wrong of such a transaction? Even when the terms are more hard on the debtor, may it not be urged that he does not accept them blindfold? He knows what he is doing when he takes upon himself the obligations of his debt and its accompanying interest; he willingly enters into the bond, believing that it will be for his own advantage. How then can he be regarded as the victim of cruelty?

This is one side of the subject, and it is not to be denied that it exhibits a considerable amount of truth from its own point of view. Even on this ground, however, it may be doubted whether the advantages of the debtor are as great as they are represented. The system of carrying on business by means of borrowed capital is answerable for much of the strain and anxiety of modern life, and not a little of the dishonesty to which traders are now tempted when hard pressed. The offer of "temporary accommodation" is inviting, but it may be questioned whether this is not more often than not a curse to those who accept it. Very frequently it only postpones the evil day. Certainly it is not found that the multiplication of "pawn-shops" tends to the comfort and well-being of the people among whom they spring up, and possibly, if we could look behind the scenes, we should discover that lending

agencies in higher commercial circles were not much more beneficial to the community.

Still, it may be urged, even if the system of borrowing and lending is often carried too far, there are cases in which it is manifestly beneficial. The borrower may be really helped over a temporary difficulty. In a time of desperate need he may even be saved from starvation. This is not to be denied. We must look at the system as a whole, however, rather than only at its favourable instances.

The strength of the case for lending money at interest rests upon certain plain laws of "Political Economy." Now it is absurd to denounce the science of "Political Economy" as "diabolical." No science can be either good or bad, for by its nature all science deals only with truth and knowledge. We do not talk of the morality of chemistry. The facts may be reprehensible; but the scientific co-ordination of them, the discovery of the principles which govern them, cannot be morally culpable. Nevertheless "Political Economy" is only a science on the ground of certain pre-suppositions. Remove those pre-suppositions, and the whole fabric falls to the ground. It is not then morally condemned; it is simply inapplicable, because its data have disappeared. Now one of the leading data of this science is the principle of self-interest. It is assumed throughout that men are simply producing and trading for their own advantage. If this assumption is allowed, the laws and their results follow with the iron necessity of fate. But if the self-seeking principle can be removed, and a social principle be made to take its place, the whole process will be altered. We see this happening with Nehemiah, who is willing to lend free of interest. In his case the strong

pleas for the reasonableness, for the very necessity of the other system fall to the ground. If the contagion of his example were universal, we should have to alter our books of "Political Economy," and write on the subject from the new standpoint of brotherly kindness.

We have not yet reached the bottom of this question. It may still be urged that, though it was very gracious of Nehemiah to act as he did, it was not therefore culpable in others who failed to share his views and means not to follow suit. In some cases the lender might be depending for a livelihood on the produce of his loans. If so, were he to decline to exact it, he himself would be absolutely impoverished. We must meet this position by taking into account the actual results of the money-lending system practised by the Jews in Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah. The interest was high—"the hundredth part of the money"*—*i.e.*, with the monthly payments usual in the East, equivalent to twelve per cent. annual interest. Then those who could not pay this interest, having already pledged their estates, forfeited the property. A wise regulation of Deuteronomy—unhappily never practised—had required the return of mortgaged land every seven years.† This merciful regulation was evidently intended to prevent the accumulation of large estates in the hands of rich men who would "add field to field" in a way denounced by the prophets with indignation.‡ Thus the tendency to inequality of lots would be avoided, and temporary embarrassment could not lead to the permanent ruin of a man and his children after him. It was felt, too, that there was a sacred character in the land, which was the

* Neh. v. 11. † Deut. xv. 1-6. ‡ *E.g.*, Isa. v. 8.

Lord's possession. It was not possible for a man to whom a portion had been allotted to wholly alienate it; for it was not his to dispose of, it was only his to hold. This mystical thought would help to maintain a sturdy race of peasants—Naboth, for example—who would feel their duty to their land to be of a religious nature, and who would therefore be elevated and strengthened in character by the very possession of it. All these advantages were missed by the customs that were found to be prevalent in the time of Nehemiah.

Far worse than the alienation of their estates was the selling of their children by the hard-pressed creditors. An ancient law of rude times recognised the fact and regulated it in regard to daughters;* but it is not easy to see how in an age of civilisation any parents possessed of natural feeling could bring themselves to consent to such a barbarity. That some did so is a proof of the morally degrading effect of absolute penury. When the wolf is at the door, the hungry man himself becomes wolfish. The horrible stories of mothers in besieged cities boiling and eating their own children can only be accounted for by some such explanation as this. Here we have the severest condemnation of the social system which permits of the utter destitution of a large portion of the community. It is most hurtful to the characters of its victims; it de-humanises them, it reduces them to the level of beasts.

Did Ezra's stern reformation prepare the way for this miserable condition of affairs? He had dared to tamper with the most sacred domestic ties. He had attacked the sanctities of the home. May we suppose that one result of his success was to lower the sense

* Exod. xxi. 7.

of home duties, and even to stifle the deepest natural affections? This is at least a melancholy possibility, and it warns us of the danger of any invasion of family claims and duties by the Church or the State.

Now it was in face of the terrible misery of the Jews that Nehemiah denounced the whole practice of usury which was the root of it. He was not contemplating those harmless commercial transactions by which, in our day, capital passes from one hand to another in a way of business that may be equally advantageous to borrower and lender. All he saw was a state of utter ruin—land alienated from its old families, boys and girls sold into slavery, and the unfortunate debtors, in spite of all their sacrifices, still on the brink of starvation. In view of such a frightful condition, he naturally denounced the whole system that led to it. What else could he have done? This was no time for a nice discrimination between the use and the abuse of the system. Nehemiah saw nothing but abuse in it. Moreover, it was not in accordance with the Hebrew way ever to draw fine distinctions. If a custom was found to be working badly, that custom was reprobated entirely; no attempt was made to save from the wreck any good elements that might have been discovered in it by a cool scientific analysis. In The Law, therefore, as well as in the particular cases dealt with by Nehemiah, lending at interest among Jews was forbidden, because as usually practised it was a cruel, hurtful practice. Nehemiah even refers to lending on a pledge, without mentioning the interest, as an evil thing, because it was taken for granted that usury went with it.*

* Neh. v. 7, 10, where instead of "usury" (A.V.) we should read "pledge."

But that usury was not thought to be morally wrong in itself we may learn from the fact that Jews were permitted by their law to practise it with foreigners,* while they were not allowed to do any really wrong thing to them. This distinction between the treatment of the Jew and that of the Gentile throws some light on the question of usury. It shows that the real ground of condemnation was that the practice was contrary to brotherhood. Since then Christianity enlarges the field of brotherhood, the limits of exactions are proportionately extended. There are many things that we cannot do to a man when we regard him as a brother, although we should have had no compunction in performing them before we had owned the close relationship.

We see then that what Nehemiah and the Jewish law really condemned was not so much the practice of taking interest in the abstract as the carrying on of cruel usury among brothers. The evil that lies in that also appears in dealings that are not directly financial. The world thinks of the Jew too much as of a Shylock who makes his money breed by harsh exactions practised on Christians. But when Christians grow rich by the ill-requited toil of their oppressed fellow-Christians, when they exact more than their pound of flesh, when drop by drop they squeeze the very life-blood out of their victims, they are guilty of the abomination of usury—in a new form, but with few of its evils lightened. To take advantage of the helpless condition of a fellow-man is exactly the wickedness denounced by Nehemiah in the heartless rich men of his day. It is no excuse for this that we are within our rights. It is not always right to insist upon our

* Deut. xv. 3-6.

rights. What is legally innocent may be morally criminal. It is even possible to get through a court of justice what is nothing better than a theft in the sight of Heaven. It can never be right to push any one down to his ruin.

But, it may be said, the miserable man brought his trouble upon himself by his own recklessness. Be it so. Still he is our brother, and we should treat him as such. We may think we are under no obligation to follow the example of Nehemiah, who refused his pay from the impoverished citizens, redeemed Israelites from slavery in foreign lands, lent money free of interest, and entertained a number of Jews at his table —all out of the savings of his old courtier days at Susa. And yet a true Christian cannot escape from the belief that there is a real obligation lying on him to imitate this royal bounty as far as his means permit.

The law in Deuteronomy commanded the Israelite to lend willingly to the needy, and not harden his heart or shut up his hands from his "poor brother." * Our Lord goes further, for He distinctly requires His disciples to lend when they do not expect that the loan will ever be returned—"If ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive," He asks, "what thanks have ye? even sinners lend to sinners, to receive again as much."† And St. Paul is thinking of no work of supererogation when he writes, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the *law* of Christ."‡ Yet if somebody suggests that these precepts should be taken seriously and put in practice to-day, he is shouted down as a fanatic. Why is this? Will Christ be satisfied with less than His own requirements?

* Deut. xv. 7, 8. † Luke vi. 34. ‡ Gal. vi. 2.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WISE AS SERPENTS.

NEHEMIAH vi.

OPEN opposition had totally failed. The watchful garrison had not once permitted a surprise. In spite of the persistent malignity of his enemies, Nehemiah had raised the walls all round the city till not a breach remained anywhere. The doors had yet to be hung at the great gateways, but the fortification of Jerusalem had proceeded so far that it was hopeless for the enemy to attempt any longer to hinder it by violence. Accordingly the leading antagonists changed their tactics. They turned from force to fraud—a method of strategy which was a confession of weakness. The antagonism to the Jews was now in a very different position from that which it had attained before Nehemiah had appeared on the scene, and when all Syria was moved and Artaxerxes himself won over to the Samaritan view. It had no support from the Satrap. It was directly against the policy sanctioned by the king. In its impotence it was driven to adopt humiliating devices of cunning and deceit; and even these expedients proved to be ineffectual. It has been well remarked that the rustic tricksters from Samaria were no match for a trained courtier. Nehemiah easily

detected the clumsy snares that were set to entrap him. Thus he illustrates that wisdom of the serpent which our Lord commends to His disciples as a useful weapon for meeting the temptations and dangers they must be prepared to encounter. The serpent, repulsive and noxious, the common symbol of sin, to some the very incarnation of the devil, was credited with a quality worthy of imitation by One who could see the "soul of goodness in things evil." The subtlety of the keen-eyed, sinuous beast appeared to Him in the light of a real excellence, which should be rescued from its degradation in the crawling reptile and set to a worthy use. He rejoiced in the revelation made to babes; but it would be an insult to the children whom He set before us as the typical members of the kingdom of heaven to mistake this for a benediction of stupidity. The fact is, dulness is often nothing but the result of indolence; it often comes from negligence in the cultivation of faculties God has given to men more generously than they will acknowledge. Surely, true religion, since it consists in a Divine *life*, must bring vitality to the whole man, and thus quicken the intellect as well as the heart. St. James refers to the highest wisdom as a gift which God bestows liberally and without upbraiding on those who ask for it.* Our plain duty, therefore, is not to permit ourselves to be befooled to our ruin.

But when we compare the wisdom of Nehemiah with the cunning of his enemies we notice a broad distinction between the two qualities. Sanballat and his fellow-conspirator, the Arab Geshem, condescend to the meanness of deceit: they try to allure their victim into their

* James i. 5.

power; they invite him to trust himself to their hospitality while intending to reward his confidence with treachery; they concoct false reports to blacken the reputation of the man whom they dare not openly attack; with diabolical craft one of their agents endeavours to tempt Nehemiah to an act of cowardice that would involve apparently a culpable breach of religious propriety, in order that his influence may be undermined by the destruction of his reputation. From beginning to end this is all a policy of lies. On the other hand, there is not a shadow of insincerity in Nehemiah's method of frustrating it. He uses his keen intelligence in discovering the plots of his foes; he never degrades it by weaving counterplots. In the game of diplomacy he outwits his opponents at every stage. If he would lend himself to their mendacious methods, he might turn them round his finger. But he will do nothing of the kind. One after another he breaks up the petty schemes of the dishonest men who continue to worry him with their devices, and quietly hands them back the fragments, to their bitter chagrin. His replies are perfectly frank; his policy is clear as the day. Wise as the serpent, he is harmless as the dove. A man of astounding discernment, he is nevertheless "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile."

The first proposal had danger written on the face of it, and the persistence with which so lame a device was repeated does not do much credit to the ingenuity of the conspirators. Their very malignity seems to have blinded them to the fact that they were not deceiving Nehemiah. Perhaps they thought that he would yield to sheer importunity. Their suggestion was that he should come out of Jerusalem and confer with Sanballat

and his friends some miles away in the plain of Sharon.* The Jews were known to be hard-pressed, weary, and famine-stricken, and any overtures that promised an amicable settlement, or even a temporary truce, might be viewed acceptably by the anxious governor on whose sole care the social troubles of the citizens as well as the military protection of the city depended. Very likely information gleaned from spies within Jerusalem guided the conspirators in choosing the opportunities for their successive overtures. These would seem most timely when the social troubles of the Jews were most serious. In another way the invitation to a parley might be thought attractive to Nehemiah. It would appeal to his nobler feelings. A generous man is unwilling to suspect the dishonesty of his neighbours.

But Nehemiah was not caught by the "confidence trick." He knew the conspirators intended to do him mischief. Yet as this intention was not actually proved against them, he put no accusation into his reply. The inference from it was clear enough. But the message itself could not be construed into any indication of discourtesy. Nehemiah was doing a great work. Therefore he could not come down. This was a perfectly genuine answer. For the governor to have left Jerusalem at the present crisis would have been disastrous to the city. The conspirators then tried another plan for getting Nehemiah to meet them outside Jerusalem. They pretended that it was reported that his work in fortifying the city was carried on with

* At Ono. This place has not yet been found. It cannot well be *Beit Unia*, north-west of Jerusalem, near *Beitin* (Bethel). Its association with Lod (Lydda) in 1 Chron. viii. 12 and Neh. xi. 35, points to the neighbourhood of the latter place.

the object of rebelling against the Persian government, and that this report had gone so far as to convey the impression that he had induced prophets to preach his kingship. Some such suspicion had been hinted at before, at the time of Nehemiah's coming up to Jerusalem,* but then its own absurdity had prevented it from taking root. Now the actual appearance of the walls round the once ruinous city, and the rising reputation of Nehemiah as a man of resource and energy, might give some colour to the calumny. The point of the conspirators' device, however, is not to be found in the actual spreading of the dangerous rumour, but in the alarm to be suggested to Nehemiah by the thought that it was being spread. Nehemiah would know very well how much mischief is wrought by idle and quite groundless talk. The libel may be totally false, and yet it may be impossible for its victim to follow it up and clear his character in every nook and cranny to which it penetrates. A lie, like a weed, if it is not nipped in the bud, sheds seeds which every wind of gossip will spread far and wide, so that it soon becomes impossible to stamp it out.

In their effort to frighten Nehemiah the conspirators suggested that the rumour would reach the king. They as much as hinted that they would undertake the business of reporting it themselves if he would not come to terms with them. This was an attempt at extracting blackmail. Having failed in their appeal to his generous instincts, the conspirators tried to work on his fears. For any one of less heroic mind than Nehemiah their diabolical threat would have been overwhelmingly powerful. Even he could not but feel

* Neh. ii. 19.

the force of it. It calls to mind the last word of the Jews that determined Pilate to surrender Jesus to the death he knew was not merited : " If thou let this Man go, thou art not Cæsar's friend." The suspicion that always haunts the mind of an autocratic sovereign gives undue weight to any charges of treason. Artaxerxes was not a Tiberius. But the good-natured monarch was liable to persuasion. Nehemiah must have had occasion to witness many instances of the fatal consequences of royal displeasure. Could he rely on the continuance of his master's favour now he was far from the court, while lying tongues were trying to poison the ears of the king ? Before first speaking of his project for helping his people, he had trembled at the risk he was about to incur ; how then could he now learn with equanimity that a cruelly mendacious representation of it was being made to Artaxerxes ? His sense of the gravity of the situation is seen in the way in which he met it. Nehemiah indignantly repudiated the charge. He boldly asserted that it had been invented by the conspirators. To them he showed an unwavering front. But we are able to look behind the scenes. It is one advantage of this autobiographical sketch of Nehemiah's that in it the writer repeatedly lifts the veil and reveals to us the secret of his thoughts. Heroic in the world, before men, he still knew his real human weakness. But he knew too that his strength was in God. Such heroism as his is not like the stolidity of the lifeless rock. It resembles the strength of the living oak, which grows more massive just in proportion as it is supplied with fresh sap. According to his custom in every critical moment of his life, Nehemiah resorted to prayer, and thus again we come upon one of those brief ejaculations uttered in

the midst of the stress and strain of a busy life that light up the pages of his narrative from time to time. The point of his prayer is simple and definite. It is just that *his hands may be strengthened.* This would have a twofold bearing. In the first place, it would certainly seek a revival of inward energy. Nehemiah waits on the Lord that He may renew his strength. He knows that God helps him through his own exercise of energy, so that if he is to be protected he must be made strong. But the prayer means more than this. For the hands to be strengthened is for their work to prosper. Nehemiah craves the aid of God that all may go right in spite of the terrible danger from lying calumnies with which he is confronted; and his prayer was answered. The second device was frustrated.

The third was managed very differently. This time Nehemiah was attacked within the city, for it was now apparent that no attempts to lure him outside the walls could succeed. A curious characteristic of the new incident is that Nehemiah himself paid a visit to the man who was the treacherous instrument of his enemies' devices. He went in person to the house of Shemaiah the prophet—a most mysterious proceeding. We have no explanation of his reason for going. Had the prophet sent for Nehemiah? or is it possible that in the dread perplexity of the crisis, amid the snares that surrounded him, oppressed with the loneliness of his position of supreme responsibility, Nehemiah hungered for a Divine message from an inspired oracle? It is plain from this chapter that the common, every-day prophets—so much below the great messengers of Jehovah whose writings represent Hebrew prophecy to us to-day—had survived the captivity, and were still

practising divination much after the manner of heathen soothsayers, as their fathers had done before them from the time when a young farmer's son was sent to Samuel to learn the whereabouts of a lost team of asses. If Nehemiah had resorted to the prophet of his own accord, his danger was indeed serious. In this case it would be the more to his credit that he did not permit himself to be duped.

Another feature of the strange incident is not very clear to us. Nehemiah tells us that the prophet was "shut up." * What does this mean? Was the man ceremonially unclean? or ill? or in custody under some accusation? None of these three explanations can be accepted, because Shemaiah proposed to proceed at once to the temple with Nehemiah, and thus confessed his seclusion to be voluntary. Can we give a metaphorical interpretation to the expression, and understand the prophet to be representing himself as under a Divine compulsion, the thought of which may give the more urgency to the advice he tenders to Nehemiah? In this case we should look for a more explicit statement, for the whole force of his message would depend upon the authority thus attributed to it. A simpler interpretation, to which the language of Shemaiah points, and one in accordance with all the wretched, scheming policy of the enemies of Nehemiah, is that the prophet pretended that he was himself in personal danger as a friend and supporter of the governor, and that therefore he found it necessary to keep himself in seclusion. Thus by his own attitude he would try to work on the fears of Nehemiah.

The proposal that the prophet should accompany

* Neh. vi. 10.

Nehemiah to the shelter of the temple, even into the "Holy Place," was temptingly plausible. The heathen regarded the shrines of their gods as sanctuaries, and similar notions seem to have attached themselves to the Jewish altar. Moreover, the massive structure of the temple was itself a defence—the temple of Herod was the last fortress to be taken in the great final siege. In the temple, too, Nehemiah might hope to be safe from the surprise of a street *émeute* among the disaffected sections of the population. Above all, the presence and counsel of a prophet would seem to sanction and authorise the course indicated. Yet it was all a cruel snare. This time the purpose was to discredit Nehemiah in the eyes of the Jews, inasmuch as his influence depended largely on his reputation. But again Nehemiah could see through the tricks of his enemies. He was neither blinded by self-interest nor overawed by prophetic authority. The use of that authority was the last arrow in the quiver of his foes. They would attack him through his religious faith. Their mistake was that they took too low a view of that faith. This is the common mistake of the irreligious in their treatment of truly devout men. Nehemiah knew that a prophet could err. Had there not been lying prophets in the days of Jeremiah? It is a proof of his true spiritual insight that he could discern one in his pretended protector. The test is clear to a man with so true a conscience as we see in Nehemiah. If the prophet says what we know to be morally wrong, he cannot be speaking from God. It is not the teaching of the Bible—not the teaching of the Old Testament any more than that of the New—that revelation supersedes conscience, that we are ever to take on authority what our moral nature abhors. The humility that would lay

conscience under the heel of authority is false and degrading, and it is utterly contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture. One great sign of the worth of a prophecy is its character. Thus the devout man is to try the spirits, whether they be of God.* Nehemiah has the clear, serene conscience that detects sin when it appears in the guise of sanctity. He sees at a glance that it would be wrong for him to follow Shemaiah's advice. It would involve a cowardly desertion of his post. It would also involve a desecration of the sacred temple enclosure. How could he, being such as he was—*i.e.*, a layman—go into the temple, even to save his life? † But did not our Lord excuse David for an analogous action in eating the shewbread? True. But Nehemiah did not enjoy the primitive freedom of David, nor the later enlightened liberty of Christ. In his intermediate position, in his age of nascent ceremonialism, it was impossible for him to see that simple human necessities could ever override the claims of ritual. His duty was shaped to him by his beliefs. So is it with every man. To him that esteemeth anything sin it is sin. ‡

Nehemiah's answer to the proposal of the wily prophet is very blunt—"I will not go in." Bluntness is the best reply to sophistry. The whole scheme was open to Nehemiah. He perceived that God had not sent the prophet, that this man was but a tool in the hands of the Samaritan conspirators. In solemnly committing the leaders of the vile conspiracy to the judgment of Heaven, Nehemiah includes a prophetess, Noadiah—degenerate successor of the patriotic Deborah!—and the whole gang of corrupt, traitorous prophets. Thus the wrongness of Shemaiah's proposal not only discredited

* 1 John iv. 1. † Neh. vi. 11. ‡ Rom. xiv. 14.

his mission; it also revealed the secret of his whole undertaking and that of his unworthy coadjutors. While Nehemiah detected the character of the false prophecy by means of his clear perceptions of right and wrong, those perceptions helped him to discover the hidden hand of his foe. He was not to be sheltered in the temple, as Shemaiah suggested; but he was saved through the keenness of his own conscience. In this case the wisdom of the serpent in him was the direct outcome of his high moral nature and the care with which he kept "conscience as the noontide clear."

Nehemiah adds two items by way of postscripts to his account of the building of the walls.

The first is the completion of the work, with its effect on the jealous enemies of the Jews. It was finished in fifty-two days—an almost incredibly short time, especially when the hindrances of internal troubles and external attacks are taken into account. The building must have been hasty and rough. Still it was sufficient for its purpose. The moral effect of it was the chief result gained. The sense of discouragement now passed over to the enemy. It was the natural reaction from the mockery with which they had assailed the commencement of the work, that at the sight of the completion of it they should be "much cast down."* We can imagine the grim satisfaction with which Nehemiah would write these words. But they tell of more than the humiliation of insulting and deceitful enemies; they complete an act in a great drama of Providence, in which the courage that stands to duty in face of all danger and the faith that looks to God in prayer are vindicated.

* Neh. vi. 16.

The second postscript describes yet another source of danger to Nehemiah—one possibly remaining after the walls were up. Tobiah, "the servant," had not been included in the previous conspiracies. But he was playing a little game of his own. The intermarriage of leading Jewish families with foreigners was bearing dangerous fruit in his case. Tobiah had married a Jewess, and his son had followed his example. In each case the alliance had brought him into connection with a well-known family in Jerusalem. These two families pleaded his merits with Nehemiah, and at the same time acted as spies and reported the words of the governor to Tobiah. The consequence was the receipt of alarmist letters from this man by Nehemiah. The worst danger might thus be found among the disaffected citizens within the walls who were irritated at the rigorously exclusive policy of Ezra, which Nehemiah had not discouraged, although he had not yet had occasion to push it further. The stoutest walls will not protect from treason within the ramparts. So after all the labour of completing the fortifications Nehemiah's trust must still be in God alone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAW.

NEHEMIAH viii. 1-8.

THE fragmentary nature of the chronicler's work is nowhere more apparent than in that portion of it which treats of the events immediately following on the completion of the fortifications of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah vii. we have a continuation of the governor's personal narrative of his work, describing how the watch was organised after the walls had been built and the gates set up.* This is followed by a remark on the sparseness of the city population,† which leads Nehemiah to insert the list of Zerubbabel's pilgrims that the chronicler subsequently copies out in his account of Zerubbabel's expedition.‡ Here the subject is dropped, to be resumed at Nehemiah xi., where the arrangements for increasing the population of Jerusalem are described. Thus we might read right on with a continuous narrative—allowing for the insertion of the genealogical record, the reason for which is obvious—and omit the three intermediate chapters without any perceptible hiatus, but, on the contrary, with a gain in consecutiveness.

These three chapters stand by themselves, and they

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* Neh. vii. 1-3. † Neh. vii. 4. ‡ Neh. vii. 5-73 = Ezra ii.

are devoted to another matter, and that a matter marked by a certain unity and distinctive character of its own. They are written in the third person, by the chronicler himself. In them Ezra suddenly reappears without any introduction, taking the leading place, while Nehemiah recedes into the background, only to be mentioned once or twice, and then as the loyal supporter of the famous scribe. The style has a striking resemblance to that of Ezra, from whom therefore, it has been conjectured, the chronicler may here have derived his materials.

These facts, and minor points that seem to support them, have raised the question whether the section Nehemiah viii.—x. is found in its right place; whether it should not have been joined on to the Book of Ezra as a description of what followed immediately after the events there recorded and before the advent of Nehemiah to Jerusalem. Ezra brought the book of The Law with him from Babylon. It would be most reasonable to suppose that he would seize the first opportunity for making it known. Accordingly we find that the corresponding section in 1 Esdras is in this position.* Nevertheless it is now generally agreed that the three chapters as they stand in the Book of Nehemiah are in their true chronological position. Twice Nehemiah himself appears in the course of the narrative they contain. He is associated with Ezra and the Levites in teaching The Law,† and his name stands first in the list of the covenanters.‡ The admission of these facts is only avoided in 1 Esdras by an alteration of the text. If we were to suppose that the existence of the name in our narrative is the result of an interpolation by a later hand, it would be difficult to account for this, and it

* 1 Esdras ix. 37-55. † Neh. viii. 9. ‡ Neh. x. 1.

would be still more difficult to discover why the chronicler should introduce confusion into his narrative by an aimless misplacement of it. His methods of procedure are sometimes curious, it must be admitted, and that we met with a misplaced section in an earlier chapter cannot be reasonably questioned.* But the motive which probably prompted that peculiar arrangement does not apply here. In the present case it would result in nothing but confusion.

The question is of far more than literary interest. The time when The Law was first made known to the people in its entirety is a landmark of the first importance for the History of Israel. There is a profound significance in the fact that though Ezra had long been a diligent student and a careful, loving scribe, though he had carried up the precious roll to Jerusalem, and though he had been in great power and influence in the city, he had not found a fitting opportunity for revealing his secret to his people before all his reforming efforts were arrested, and the city and its inhabitants trampled under foot by their envious neighbours. Then came Nehemiah's reconstruction. Still the consideration of The Law remained in abeyance. While Jerusalem was an armed camp, and while the citizens were toiling at the walls or mounting guard by turn, there was no opportunity for a careful attention to the sacred document. All this time Ezra was out of sight, and his name not once mentioned. Yet he was far too brilliant a star to have been eclipsed even by the rising of Nehemiah. We can only account for the sudden and absolute vanishing of the greatest figure of the age by supposing that he had retired from the scene,

* Ezra iv. 7-23.

perhaps gone back to Babylon alone with his grief and disappointment. Those were not days for the scholar's mission. But now, with the return of some amount of security and its accompanying leisure, Ezra emerges again, and immediately he is accorded the front place and Nehemiah—the "Saviour of Society"—modestly assumes the attitude of his disciple. A higher tribute to the exalted position tacitly allowed to the scribe or a finer proof of the unselfish humility of the young statesman cannot be imagined. Though at the height of his power, having frustrated the many evil designs of his enemies and completed his stupendous task of fortifying the city of his fathers in spite of the most vexatious difficulties, the successful patriot is not in the least degree flushed with victory. In the quietest manner possible he steps aside and yields the first place to the recluse, the student, the writer, the teacher. This is a sign of the importance that ideas will assume in the new age. The man of action gives place to the man of thought. Still more is it a hint of the coming ecclesiasticism of the new Jewish order. As the civil ruler thus takes a lower ground in the presence of the religious leader, we seem to be anticipating those days of the triumph of the Church when a king would stand like a groom to hold the horse of a pope. And yet this is not officially arranged. It is not formally conceded on the one side, nor is it formally demanded on the other side. The situation may be rather compared with that of Savonarola in Florence when by sheer moral force he overtopped the power of the Medici, or that of Calvin at Geneva when the municipal council willingly yielded to the commanding spirit of the minister of religion because it recognised the supremacy of religion.

In such a condition of affairs the city was ripe for the public exposition of The Law. But even then Ezra only published it after having been requested to do so by the people. We cannot assign this delay of his to any reluctance to let his fellow-countrymen know the law which he had long loved and studied in private. We may rather conclude that he perceived the utter inutility of any attempt to thrust it upon inattentive hearers—nay, the positive mischievousness of such a proceeding. This would approach the folly described by our Lord when He warned His disciples against casting pearls before swine. Very much of the popular indifference to the Bible among large sections of the population to-day must be laid at the doors of those unwise zealots who have dinned the mere letter of it into the ears of unwilling auditors. The conduct of Ezra shows that, with all his reverence for The Law, the Great Scribe did not consider that it was to be imposed, like a civil code, by magisterial authority. The decree of Artaxerxes had authorised him to enforce it in this way on every Jew west of the Euphrates.* But either the unsettled state of the country or the wisdom of Ezra had not permitted the application of the power thus conferred. The Law was to be voluntarily adopted. It was to be received, as all true religion must be received, in living faith, with the acquiescence of the conscience, judgment, and will of those who acknowledged its obligations.

The occasion for such a reception of it was found when the Jews were freed from the toil and anxiety that accompanied the building of their city walls. The chronicler says that this was in the seventh month;

* Ezra vii. 25, 26.

but he does not give the year. Considering the abrupt way in which he has introduced the section about the reading of The Law, we cannot be certain in what year this took place. If we may venture to take the narrative continuously, in connection with Nehemiah's story in the previous chapters, we shall get this occurrence within a week after the completion of the fortifications. That was on "the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul" *—*i.e.*, the sixth month. The reading began on "the first day of the seventh month." † That is to say, on this supposition, it followed immediately on the first opportunity of leisure. Then the time was specially appropriate, for it was the day of the Feast of Trumpets, which was observed as a public holiday and an occasion for an assembly—"a holy convocation." ‡ On this day the citizens met in a favourite spot, the open space just inside the Water Gate, at the east end of the city, close to the temple, and now part of the Haram, or sacred enclosure. They were unanimous in their desire to have no more delay before hearing the law which Ezra had brought up to Jerusalem as much as thirteen years before. Why were they all on a sudden thus eager, after so long a period of indifference? Was it that the success of Nehemiah's work had given them a new hope and confidence, a new idea, indeed? They now saw the compact unity of Jerusalem established. Here was the seal and centre of their separateness. Accepting this as an accomplished fact, the Jews were ready and even anxious to know that sacred law in which their distinction from other people and their consecration to Jehovah were set forth.

Not less striking is the manner in which Ezra

* Neh. vi. 15. † Neh. viii. 2. ‡ Lev. xxiii. 24.

met this welcome request of the Jews. The scene which follows is unique in history—the Great Scribe with the precious roll in his hand standing on a temporary wooden platform so that he may be seen by everybody in the vast crowd—seven Levites supporting him on either side*—other select Levites going about among the people after each section of The Law has been read in order to explain it to separate groups of the assembly†—the motley gathering comprising the bulk of the citizens, not men only but women also, for the brutal Mohammedan exclusiveness that confines religious knowledge to one sex was not anticipated by the ancient Jews; not adults only, but children also, "those that could understand," for The Law is for the simplest minds, the religion of Israel is to be popular and domestic—the whole of this multitude assembling in the cool, fresh morning when the first level rays of the sun smite the city walls from over the Mount of Olives, and standing reverently hour after hour, till the hot autumn noon puts an end to the lengthy meeting.

* In Neh. viii. 4 six names are given for the right-hand contingent and seven for the left-hand. But since in the corresponding account of 1 Esdras fourteen names occur, one name would seem to have dropped out of Nehemiah. The prominence given to the Levites in all these scenes and the absence of reference to the priests should be noted. The Levites were still important personages, although degraded from the priesthood. The priests were chiefly confined to ritual functions; later they entered on the duties of civil government. The Levites were occupied with teaching the people, with whom they came into closer contact. Their work corresponded more to that of the pastoral office. In these times, too, most of the scribes seem to have been Levites.

† Not translating it into the Aramaic dialect. That would have been a superfluous task, for the Jews certainly knew Hebrew at this time. Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets down to Malachi wrote in Hebrew.

In all this the fact which comes out most prominently, accentuated by every detail of the arrangements, is the popularisation of The Law. Its multiplex precepts were not only recited in the hearing of men, women, and children; they were carefully expounded to the people. Hitherto it had been a matter of private study among learned men; its early development had been confined to a small group of faithful believers in Jehovah; its customary practices had been privately elaborated through the ages almost like the mysteries of a secret cult; and therefore its origin had been buried in hopeless obscurity. So it was like the priestly ritual of heathenism. The priest of Eleusis guarded his secrets from all but those who were favoured by being solemnly initiated into them. Now this unwholesome condition was to cease. The most sacred rites were to be expounded to all the people. Ezra knew that the only worship God would accept must be offered with the mind and the heart. Moreover, The Law concerned the actions of the people themselves, their own minute observance of purifications and careful avoidance of defilements, their own offerings and festivals. No priestly performances could avail as a substitute for these popular religious observances.

Yet much of The Law was occupied with directions concerning the functions of the priests and the sacrificial ritual. By acquainting the laity with these directions, Ezra and his helpers were doing their best to fortify the nation against the tyranny of sacerdotalism. The Levites, who at this time were probably still sore at the thought of their degradation and jealous of the favoured line of Zadok, would naturally fall in with such a policy. It was the more remarkable because the new theocracy was just now coming into

power. Here would be a powerful protection against the abuse of its privileges by the hierarchy. Priests, all the world over, have made capital out of their exclusive knowledge of the ritual of religion. They have jealously guarded their secrets from the uninitiated multitude, so as to make themselves necessary to anxious worshippers who dreaded to give offence to their gods or to fail in their sacrifices through ignorance of the prescribed methods. By committing the knowledge of The Law to the people, Ezra protected the Jews against this abuse. Everything was to be above board, in broad daylight; and the degradation of ignorant worship was not to be encouraged, much as a corrupt priesthood in later times might desire it. An indirect consequence of this publication of The Law with the careful instruction of the people in its contents was that the element of knowledge took a more exalted position in religion. It is not the magical priest, it is the logical scribe who really leads the people now. Ideas will mean more than in the old days of obscure ritual. There is an end to the "dim religious light." Henceforth *Torah—Instruction*—is to be the most fundamental ground of faith.

It is important that we should see clearly what was contained in this roll of The Law out of which Ezra read to the citizens of Jerusalem. The distress with which its contents were received would lead us to suppose that the grave minatory passages of Deuteronomy were especially prominent in the reading. We cannot gather from the present scene any further indications of the subjects brought before the Jews. But from other parts of the Book of Nehemiah we can learn for certain that the whole of the Pentateuch was now introduced to the people. If it was not all read

out in the Ecclesia, it was all in the hands of Ezra, and its several parts were made known from time to time as occasion required. First, we may infer that in addition to Deuteronomy Ezra's law contained the ancient Jehovistic narrative, because the treatment of mixed marriages * refers to the contents of this portion of the Pentateuch.† Secondly, we may see that it included "The Law of Holiness," because the regulations concerning the sabbatic year ‡ are copied from that collection of rules about defilement and consecration.§ Thirdly, we may be equally sure that it did not lack "The Priestly Code"—the elaborate system of ritual which occupies the greater part of Numbers and Leviticus—because the law of the firstfruits ‖ is taken from that source.¶ Here, then, we find allusions to the principal constituent elements of the Pentateuch scattered over the brief Book of Nehemiah. It is clear, therefore, that the great accretion of customs and teachings, which only reached completion after the close of the captivity, was the treasure Ezra now introduced to his people. Henceforth nothing less can be understood when the title "The Law" is used. From this time obedience to the Torah will involve subjection to the whole system of priestly and sacrificial regulations, to all the rules of cleanness and consecration and sacrifice contained in the Pentateuch.**

A more difficult point to be determined is, how far

* Neh. x. 30.
† Exod. xxxiv. 16.
‡ Neh. x. 31.
§ Lev. xxv. 2-7.
‖ Neh. x. 35-39.
¶ Lev. xxvii. 30; Num. xv. 20 ff., xviii. 11-32.
** Strictly speaking, the Hexateuch, as "Joshua" was undoubtedly included in the volume. But the familiar term Pentateuch may serve here, as it is to the *legal* requirements contained in the earlier books that reference is made.

this Pentateuch was really a new thing when it was introduced by Ezra. Here we must separate two very different questions. If they had always been kept apart, much confusion would have been avoided. The first is the question of the novelty of The Law *to the Jews*. There is little difficulty in answering this question. The very process of reading The Law and explaining it goes on the assumption that it is not known. The people receive it as something strange and startling. Moreover, this scene of the revelation of The Law to Israel is entirely in harmony with the previous history of the nation. Whenever The Law was shaped as we now know it, it is clear that it was not practised in its present form by the Jews before Ezra's day. We have no contemporary evidence of the use of it in the earlier period. We have clear evidence that conduct contrary to many of its precepts was carried on with impunity, and even encouraged by prophets and religious leaders without any protest from priests or scribes. The complete law is new to Israel. But there is a second question—viz., how far was this law *new in itself*? Nobody can suppose that it was an absolutely novel creation of the exile, with no roots in the past. Their repeated references to Moses show that its supporters relegated its origin to a dim antiquity, and we should belie all we know of their character if we did not allow that they were acting in good faith. But we have no evidence that The Law had been completed, codified, and written out in full before the time of Ezra. In antiquity, when writing was economised and memory cultivated to a degree of accuracy that seems to us almost miraculous, it would be possible to hand down a considerable system of ritual or of jurisprudence by tradition. Even this stupendous act of

memory would not exceed that of the rhapsodists who preserved and transmitted the unwritten *Iliad*. But we are not driven to such an extreme view. We do not know how much of The Law may have been committed to writing in earlier ages. Some of it was, certainly. It bears evidence of its history in the several strata of which it is composed, and which must have been deposited successively. Deuteronomy, in its essence and original form, was certainly known before the captivity. So were the Jehovistic narrative and the Law of the Covenant. The only question as regards Ezra's day turns on the novelty of the Priestly Code, with the Law of Holiness, and the final editing and redaction of the whole. This is adumbrated in Ezekiel and the degradation of the Levites, who are identified with the priests in Deuteronomy, but set in a lower rank in Leviticus, assigned to its historical occasion. Here, then, we see the latest part of Ezra's law in the making. It was not created by the scribe. It was formed out of traditional usages of the priests, modified by recent directions from a prophet. The origin of these usages was lost in antiquity, and therefore it was natural to attribute them to Moses, the great founder of the nation. We cannot even affirm that Ezra carried out the last redaction of The Law with his own hand, that he codified the traditional usages, the "Common Law" of Israel. What we know is, that he published this law. That he also edited it is an inference drawn from his intimate connection with the work as student and scribe, and supported by the current of later traditions. But while this is possible, what is indubitable is that to Ezra is due the glory of promulgating the law and making it pass into the life of the nation. Henceforth Judaism is legalism. We

know this in its imperfection and its difference from the spiritual faith of Christ. To the contemporaries of Ezra it indicated a stage of progress—knowledge in place of superstitious bondage to the priesthood, conscientious obedience to ordinances instituted for the public welfare instead of careless indifference or obstinate self-will. Therefore its appearance marked a forward step in the course of Divine revelation.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE JOY OF THE LORD.

NEHEMIAH viii. 9-18.

"ALL the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Was it for this mournful end that Ezra had studied the sacred law and guarded it through the long years of political unrest, until at length he was able to make it known with all the pomp and circumstance of a national festival? Evidently the leaders of the people had expected no such result. But, disappointing as it was, it might have been worse. The reading might have been listened to with indifference; or the great, stern law might have been rejected with execration, or scoffed at with incredulity. Nothing of the kind happened. There was no doubt as to the rightness of The Law, no reluctance to submit to its yoke, no disposition to ignore its requirements. This law had come with all the authority of the Persian government to sanction it; and yet it is evidently no fear of the magistrate, but their own convictions, their confirming consciences, that here influence the people and determine their attitude to it. Thus Ezra's labours were really honoured by the Jews, though their fruits were received so sorrowfully.

We must not suppose that the Jews of Ezra's day anticipated the ideas of St. Paul. It was not a Christian

objection to law that troubled them; they did not complain of its externalism, its bondage, its formal requirements and minute details. To imagine that these features of The Law were regarded with disapproval by the first hearers of it is to credit them with an immense advance in thought beyond their leaders—Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites. It is clear that their grief arose simply from their perception of their own miserable imperfections in contrast to the lofty requirements of The Law, and in view of its sombre threats of punishment for disobedience. The discovery of a new ideal of conduct above that with which we have hitherto been satisfied naturally provokes painful stings of conscience, which the old salve, compounded of the comfortable little notions we once cherished, will not neutralise. In the new light of the higher truth we suddenly discover that the "robe of righteousness" in which we have been parading is but as "filthy rags." Then our once vaunted attainments become despicable in our own eyes. The eminence on which we have been standing so proudly is seen to be a wretched mole-hill compared with the awful snow-peak from which the clouds have just dispersed. Can we ever climb that? Goodness now seems to be hopelessly unattainable; yet never before was it so desirable, because never before did it shine with so rare and fascinating a lustre.

But, it may be objected, was not the religious and moral character of the teaching of the great prophets—of Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah—larger and higher and more spiritual than the legalism of the Pentateuch? That may be granted; but it is not to the point here. The lofty prophetic teaching had never been accepted by the nation. The prophets had been voices crying in

the wilderness. Their great spiritual thoughts had never been seriously followed except by a small group of devout souls. It was the Christian Church that first built on the foundation of the prophets. But in Ezra's day the Jews as a body frankly accepted The Law. Whether this were higher or lower than the ideal of prophetism does not affect the case. The significant fact is that is was higher than any ideal the people had hitherto adopted in practice. The perception of this fact was most distressing to them.

Nevertheless the Israelite leaders did not share the feeling of grief. In their eyes the sorrow of the Jews was a great mistake. It was even a wrong thing for them thus to distress themselves. Ezra loved The Law, and therefore it was to him a dreadful surprise to discover that the subject of his devoted studies was regarded so differently by his brethren. Nehemiah and the Levites shared his more cheerful view of the situation. Lyrics of this and subsequent ages bear testimony to the passionate devotion with which the sacred Torah was cherished by loyal disciples. The author of the hundred and nineteenth Psalm ransacks his vocabulary for varying phrases on which to ring the changes in praise of the law, the judgments, the statutes, the commandments of God. He cries :—

"I will delight in Thy statutes :
I will not forget Thy word.

* * * *

"Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold
Wondrous things out of Thy law.

* * * *

"Unless Thy law had been my delight,
I should have perished in mine affliction.

* * * *

"Great peace have they that love Thy law,
And they have none occasion of stumbling."

Moreover, the student of The Law to-day can perceive that its intention was beneficent. It maintained righteousness; and righteousness is the chief good. It regulated the mutual relations of men with regard to justice; it ordained purity; it contained many humane rules for the protection of men and even of animals; it condescended to most wholesome sanitary directions. Then it declared that he who kept its ordinances should live, not merely by reason of an arbitrary arrangement, but because it pointed out the natural and necessary way of life and health. The Divine Spirit that had guided the development of it had presided over something more inviting than the forging of fetters for a host of miserable slaves, something more useful than the creation of a tantalising exemplar that should be the despair of every copyist. Ezra and his fellow-leaders knew the *intention* of The Law. This was the ground of their joyous confidence in contemplation of it. They were among those who had been led by their personal religion into possession of "the secret of the Lord." They had acquainted themselves with Him, and therefore they were at peace. Their example teaches us that we must penetrate beyond the letter to the spirit of revelation if we would discover its hidden thoughts of love. When we do so even The Law will be found to enshrine an evangel. Not that these men of the olden times perceived the fanciful symbolism which many Christians have delighted to extract from the most mechanical details of the tabernacle ritual. Their eyes were fixed on the gracious Divine purpose of creating a holy nation—separate and pure—and The Law seemed to be the best instrument for accomplishing that purpose. Meanwhile its impracticability did not strike them, because they thought of the thing

in itself rather than of the relation of men to it. Religious melancholy springs from habits of subjectivity. The joyous spirit is that which forgets self in the contemplation of the thoughts of God. It is our meditation of Him—not of self—that is sweet.

Of course this would have been unreasonable if it had totally ignored human conditions and their relation to the Divine. In that case Ezra and his companions would have been vain dreamers, and the sorrowing multitude people of common-sense perceptions. But we must remember that the new religious movement was inspired by faith. It is faith that bridges the vast chasm between the real and the ideal. God had given The Law in lovingkindness and tender mercy. Then God would make the attainment of His will revealed in it possible. The part of brave and humble men was to look away from themselves to the revelation of God's thought concerning them with grateful admiration of its glorious perfection.

While considerations of this sort would make it possible for the leaders to regard The Law in a very different spirit from that manifested by the rest of the Jews, other reflections led them to go further and check the outburst of grief as both unseemly and hurtful.

It was unseemly, because it was marring the beauty of a great festival. The Jews were to stay their grief seeing that the day was holy unto the Lord.* This was as much as to say that sorrow was defiling. The world had to wait for the religion of the cross to reveal to it the sanctity of sorrow. Undoubtedly the Jewish festivals were joyous celebrations. It is the greatest mistake to represent the religion of the Old Testament

* Neh. viii. 9.

as a gloomy cult overshadowed by the thunder-clouds of Sinai. On the contrary, its greatest offices were celebrated with music, dancing, and feasting. The high day was a holiday, sunny and mirthful. It would be a pity to spoil such an occasion with unseasonable lamentations. But Nehemiah and Ezra must have had a deeper thought than this in their deprecation of grief at the festival. To allow such behaviour is to entertain unworthy feelings towards God. A day sacred to the Lord is a day in which His presence is especially felt. To draw near to God with no other feelings than emotions of fear and grief is to misapprehend His nature and His disposition towards His people. Worship should be inspired with the gladness of grateful hearts praising God, because otherwise it would discredit His goodness.

This leads to a thought of wider range and still more profound significance, a thought that flashes out of the sacred page like a brilliant gem, a thought so rich and glad and bountiful that it speaks for its own inspiration as one of the great Divine ideas of Scripture—"The joy of the Lord is your strength." Though the unseemliness of mourning on a feast day was the first and most obvious consideration urged by the Jewish leaders in their expostulation with the distressed multitude, the real justification for their rebukes and exhortations is to be found in the magnificent spiritual idea that they here give expression to. In view of such a conviction as they now gladly declare they would regard the lamentation of the Jews as more than unseemly, as positively hurtful and even wrong.

By the expression "the joy of the Lord" it seems clear that Nehemiah and his associates meant a joy which may be experienced by men through their fellowship with God. The phrase could be used for the

gladness of God Himself; as we speak of the righteousness of God or the love of God, so we might speak of His joy in reference to His own infinite life and consciousness. But in the case before us the drift of the passage directs our thoughts to the moods and feelings of men. The Jews are giving way to grief, and they are rebuked for so doing and encouraged to rejoice. In this situation some thoughts favourable to joy on their part are naturally suitable. Accordingly they are called to enter into a pure and lofty gladness in which they are assured they will find their strength.

This "joy of the Lord," then, is the joy that springs up in our hearts by means of our relation to God. It is a God-given gladness, and it is found in communion with God. Nevertheless the other "joy of the Lord" is not to be left out of account when we think of the gladness which comes to us from God, for the highest joy is possible to us just because it is first experienced by God. There could be no joy in communion with a morose divinity. The service of Moloch must have been a terror, a perfect agony to his most loyal devotees. The feelings of a worshipper will always be reflections from what he thinks he perceives in the countenance of his god. They will be gloomy if the god is a sombre personage, and cheerful if he is a glad being. Now the revelation of God in the Bible is the unveiling with growing clearness of a countenance of unspeakable love and beauty and gladness. He is made known to us as "the blessed God"—the happy God. Then the joy of His children is the overflow of His own deep gladness streaming down to them. This is the "joy in the presence of the angels" which, springing from the great heart of God, makes the happiness of returning penitents, so that they share in their Father's delight, as the prodigal

shares in the home festivities when the fatted calf is killed. This same communication of gladness is seen in the life of our Lord, not only during those early sunny days in Galilee when His ministry opened under a cloudless sky, but even amid the darkness of the last hours at Jerusalem, for in His final discourse Jesus prayed that His joy might be in His disciples in order that their joy might be full. A more generous perception of this truth would make religion like sunshine and music, like the blooming of spring flowers and the outburst of woodland melody about the path of the Christian pilgrim. It is clear that Jesus Christ expected this to be the case since He commenced His teaching with the word "Blessed." St. Paul, too, saw the same possibility, as his repeated encouragements to "Rejoice" bear witness. Religion may be compared to one of those Italian city churches which are left outwardly bare and gloomy, while within they are replete with treasures of art. We must cross the threshold, push aside the heavy curtain, and tread the sacred pavement, if we would see the beauty of sculptured column and mural fresco and jewelled altar-piece. Just in proportion as we draw near to God shall we behold the joy and love that ever dwell in Him, till the vision of these wonders kindles our love and gladness.

Now the great idea that is here suggested to us connects this Divine joy with strength—the joy is an inspiration of energy. By the nature of things joy is exhilarating, while pain is depressing. Physiologists recognise it as a law of animal organisms that happiness is a nerve tonic. It would seem that the same law obtains in spiritual experience. On the other hand, nothing is more certain than that there are enervating pleasures, and that the free indulgence in pleasure generally

weakens the character; with this goes the equally certain truth that men may be braced by suffering, that the east wind of adversity may be a real stimulant. How shall we reconcile these contradictory positions? Clearly there are different kinds and grades of delight, and different ways of taking and using every form of gladness. Pure hedonism cannot but be a weak system of life. It is the Spartan, not the Sybarite, who is capable of heroic deeds. Even Epicurus, whose name has been abused to shelter low pleasure-seeking, perceived, as clearly as "The Preacher," the melancholy truth that the life that is given over to the satisfaction of personal desires is but "vanity of vanities." The joy that exhilarates is not sought as a final goal. It comes in by the way when we are pursuing some objective end. Then this purest joy is as far above the pleasure of the self-indulgent as heaven is above hell. It may even be found side by side with bodily pain, as when martyrs exult in their flames, or when stricken souls in more prosaic circumstances awake to the wonderful perception of a rare Divine gladness. It is this joy that gives strength. There is enthusiasm in it. Such a joy not being an end in itself is a means to a great practical end. God's glad children are strong to do and bear His will, strong in their very gladness.

This was good news to the Jews, outwardly but a feeble flock and a prey to the ravening wolves from neighbouring lands. They had recovered hope after building their walls; but these hastily constructed fortifications did not afford them their most secure stronghold. Their refuge was God. They carried bows and spears and swords; but the strength with which they wielded these weapons consisted in the enthusiasm of a Divine gladness—not the orgiastic fury of

the heathen, but the deep, strong joy of men who knew the secret of their Lord, who possessed what Wordsworth calls "inward glee." This joy was essentially a moral strength. It bestowed the power wherewith to keep the law. Here was the answer to the discouragement of the people in their dawning perception of the lofty requirements of God's holy will. The Christian can best find energy for service, as well as the calm strength of patience, in that still richer Divine gladness which is poured into his heart by the grace of Christ. It is not only unfortunate for anybody to be a mournful Christian; it is dangerous, hurtful, even wrong. Therefore the gloomy servant of God is to be rebuked for missing the Divine gladness. Seeing that the source of it is in God, and not in the Christian himself, it is attainable and possible to the most sorrowful. He who has found this "pearl of great price" can afford to miss much else in life and yet go on his way rejoicing.

It was natural that the Jews should have been encouraged to give expression to the Divine joy at a great festival. The final harvest-home of the year, the merry celebration of the vintage, was then due. No Jewish feast was more cheerful than this, which expressed gratitude for "wine that maketh glad the heart of man." The superiority of Judaism over heathenism is seen in the tremendous contrast between the simple gaiety of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles and the gross debauchery of the Bacchanalian orgies which disgraced a similar occasion in the pagan world. It is to our shame in modern Christendom that we dare not imitate the Jews here, knowing too well that if we tried to do so we should only sink to the heathen level. Our Feast of Tabernacles would certainly become a Feast of Bacchus, bestial and wicked. Happily the Jews did

not feel the Teutonic danger of intemperance. Their festival recognised the Divine bounty in nature, in its richest, ripest autumn fruitfulness, which was like the smile of God breaking out through His works to cheer His children. Bivouacking in greenwood bowers, the Jews did their best to return to the life of nature and share its autumn gladness. The chronicler informs us that since the days of Joshua the Jews had never observed the feast as they did now—never with such great gladness and never so truly after the directions of their law. Although the actual words he gives as from The Law * are not to be found in the Pentateuch, they sum up the regulations of that work. This then is the first application of The Law which the people have received with so much distress. It ordains a glad festival. So much brighter is religion when it is understood and practised than when it is only contemplated from afar! Now the reading of The Law can go on day by day, and be received with joy.

Finally, like the Christians who collected food and money at the *Agapé* for their poorer brethren and for the martyrs in prison, the Jews were to "send portions" to the needy.† The rejoicing was not to be selfish; it was to stimulate practical kindness. Here was its safeguard. We shrink from accepting joy too freely lest it should be followed by some terrible Nemesis; but if, instead of gloating over it in secret, selfishly and greedily, we use it as a talent, and endeavour to lessen the sorrows of others by inviting them to share it, the heathenish dread is groundless. He who is doing his utmost to help his brother may dare to be very happy.

* Neh. viii. 14, 15. † Neh. viii. 12.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RELIGION OF HISTORY.

NEHEMIAH ix.

AFTER the carnival—Lent. This Catholic procedure was anticipated by the Jews in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The merry feast of Tabernacles was scarcely over, when, permitting an interval of but a single day, the citizens of Jerusalem plunged into a demonstration of mourning—fasting, sitting in sackcloth, casting dust on their heads, abjuring foreign connections, confessing their own and their fathers' sins. Although the singular revulsion of feeling may have been quite spontaneous on the part of the people, the violent reaction to which it gave rise was sanctioned by the authorities. In an open-air meeting which lasted for six hours—three of Bible-reading and three of confession and worship—the Levites took the lead, as they had done at the publication of The Law a few weeks earlier. But these very men had rebuked the former outburst of lamentation. Must we suppose that their only objection on that occasion was that the mourning was then untimely, because it was indulged in at a festival, whereas it ought to have been postponed to a fast day? If that were all, we should have to contemplate a miserably artificial condition of affairs. Real emotions refuse to come and go at the bidding of officials

pedantically set on regulating their alternate recurrence in accordance with a calendar of the church year. A theatrical representation of feeling may be drilled into some such orderly procession. But true feeling itself is of all things in the universe the most restive under direct orders.

We must look a little deeper. The Levites had given a great spiritual reason for the restraint of grief in their wonderful utterance, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." This noble thought is not an elixir to be administered or withheld according to the recurrence of ecclesiastical dates. If it is true at all, it is eternally true. Although the application of it is not always a fact of experience, the reason for the fluctuations in our personal relations to it is not to be looked for in the almanack; it will be found in those dark passages of human life which, of their own accord, shut out the sunlight of Divine gladness. There is then no absolute inconsistency in the action of the Levites. And yet perhaps they may have perceived that they had been hasty in their repression of the first outburst of grief; or at all events that they did not then see the whole truth of the matter. There was some ground for lamentation after all, and though the expression of sorrow at a festival seemed to them untimely, they were bound to admit its fitness a little later. It is to be observed that another subject was now brought under the notice of the people. The contemplation of the revelation of God's will should not produce grief. But the consideration of man's conduct cannot but lead to that result. At the reading of the Divine law the Jews' lamentation was rebuked; at the recital of their own history it was encouraged. Yet even here it was not to be abject and hopeless. The

Levites exhorted the people to shake off the lethargy of sorrow, to *stand up* and bless the Lord their God. Even in the very act of confessing sin we have a special reason for praising God, because the consciousness of our guilt in His sight must heighten our appreciation of His marvellous forbearance.

The Jews' confession of sin led up to a prayer which the Septuagint ascribes to Ezra. It does so, however, in a phrase that manifestly breaks the context, and thus betrays its origin in an interpolation.* Nevertheless the tone of the prayer, and even its very language, remind us forcibly of the Great Scribe's outpouring of soul over the mixed marriages of his people recorded in Ezra ix. No one was more fitted to lead the Jews in the later act of devotion, and it is only reasonable to conclude that the work was undertaken by the one man to whose lot it would naturally fall.

The prayer is very like some of the historical psalms. By pointing to the variegated picture of the History of Israel, it shows how God reveals Himself through events. This suggests the probability that the three hours' reading of the fast day had been taken from the historical parts of the Pentateuch. The religious teachers of Israel knew what riches of instruction were buried in the history of their nation, and they had the wisdom to unearth those treasures for the benefit of their own age. It is strange that we English have made so little use of a national history that is not a whit less providential, although it does not glitter with visible miracles. God has spoken to England as truly through the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the Puritan Wars, and the Revolution, as ever He spoke to

* LXX. Ezra ix. 6-15.

Israel by means of the Exodus, the Captivity, and the Return.

The arrangement and method of the prayer lend themselves to a singularly forcible presentation of its main topics, with heightening effect as it proceeds in a recapitulation of great historical landmarks. It opens with an outburst of praise to God. In saying that Jehovah is God alone, it makes more than a cold pronouncement of Jewish monotheism; it confesses the practical supremacy of God over His universe, and therefore over His people and their enemies. God is adored as the Creator of heaven; and, perhaps with an allusion to the prevalent Gentile title "God of heaven," as even the Maker of the heaven of heavens, of that higher heaven of which the starry firmament is but the gold-sprinkled floor. There, in those far-off, unseen heights, He is adored. But earth and sea, with all that inhabit them, are also God's works. From the highest to the lowest, over great and small, He reigns supreme. This glowing expression of adoration constitutes a suitable exordium. It is right and fitting that we should approach God in the attitude of pure worship, for the moment entirely losing ourselves in the contemplation of Him. This is the loftiest act of prayer, far above the selfish shriek for help in dire distress to which unspiritual men confine their utterance before God. It is also the most enlightening preparation for those lower forms of devotion that cannot be neglected so long as we are engaged on earth with our personal needs and sins, because it is necessary for us first of all to know what God is, and to be able to contemplate the thought of His being and nature, if we would understand the course of His action among men, or see our sins in the only true light—the light of His countenance. We

can best trace the course of low-lying valleys from a mountain height. The primary act of adoration illumines and directs the thanksgiving, confession, and petition that follow. He who has once seen God knows how to look at the world and his own heart, without being misled by earthly glamour or personal prejudice.

In tracking the course of revelation through history, the author of the prayer follows two threads. First one and then the other is uppermost, but it is the interweaving of them that gives the definite pattern of the whole picture. These are God's grace and man's sin. The method of the prayer is to bring them into view alternately, as they are illustrated in the History of Israel. The result is like a drama of several acts, and three scenes in each act. Although we see progress and a continuous heightening of effect, there is a startling resemblance between the successive acts, and the relative characters of the scenes remain the same throughout. In the *first* scene we always behold the free and generous favour of God offered to the people He condescends to bless, altogether apart from any merits or claims on their part. In the *second* we are forced to look at the ugly picture of Israel's ingratitude and rebellion. But this is invariably followed by a *third* scene, which depicts the wonderful patience and long-suffering of God, and His active aid in delivering His guilty people from the troubles they have brought on their own heads by their sins, whenever they turn to Him in penitence.

The recital opens where the Jews delighted to trace their origin, in Ur of the Chaldees. These returned exiles from Babylon are reminded that at the very dawn of their ancestral history the same district was the

starting-point. The guiding hand of God was seen in bringing up the Father of the Nation in that far-off tribal migration from Chaldæa to Canaan. At first the Divine action did not need to exhibit all the traits of grace and power that were seen later, because Abraham was not a captive. Then, too, there was no rebellion, for Abraham was faithful. Thus the first scene opens with the mild radiance of early morning. As yet there is nothing tragic on either side. The chief characteristic of this scene is its promise, and the author of the prayer anticipates some of the later scenes by interjecting a grateful recognition of the faithfulness of God in keeping His word. "For Thou art righteous," he says.* This truth is the keynote to the prayer. The thought of it is always present as an undertone, and it emerges clearly again towards the conclusion, where, however, it wears a very different garb. There we see how in view of man's sin God's righteousness inflicts chastisement. But the intention of the author is to show that throughout all the vicissitudes of history God holds on to His straight line of righteousness, unwavering. It is just because He does not change that His action must be modified in order to adjust itself to the shifting behaviour of men and women. It is the very immutability of God that requires Him to show Himself froward with the froward, although He is merciful with the merciful.

The chief events of the Exodus are next briefly recapitulated, in order to enlarge the picture of God's early goodness to Israel. Here we may discern more than promise; the fulfilment now begins. Here, too, God is seen in that specific activity of deliverance

* Neh. ix. 8.

which comes more and more to the front as the history proceeds. While the calamities of the people grow worse and worse, God reveals Himself with ever-increasing force as the Redeemer of Israel. The plagues of Egypt, the passage of the Red Sea, the drowning of the Egyptians, the cloud-pillar by day and the pillar of fire by night, the descent on Sinai for the giving of The Law—in which connection the one law of the Sabbath is singled out, a point to be noted in view of the great prominence given to it later on—the manna, and the water from the rock, are all signs and proofs of God's exceeding kindness towards His people.

But now we are directed to a very different scene. In spite of all this never-ceasing, this ever-accumulating goodness of God, the infatuated people rebel, appoint a captain to take them back to Egypt, and relapse into idolatry. This is the human side of the history, shown up in its deep blackness against the luminous splendour of the heavenly background.

Then comes the marvellous third scene, the scene that should melt the hardest heart. God does not cast off His people. The privileges enumerated before are carefully repeated, to show that God has not withdrawn them. Still the cloud-pillar guides by day and the fire-pillar by night. Still the manna and the water are supplied. But this is not all. Between these two pairs of favours a new one is now inserted. God gives His "good Spirit" to instruct the people. The author does not seem to be referring to any one specific event, as that of the Spirit falling on the elders, or the incident of the unauthorised prophet, or the bestowal of the Spirit on the artists of the tabernacle. We should rather conclude from the generality of his terms that he is thinking of the gift of the Spirit in each

of these cases, and also in every other way in which the Divine Presence was felt in the hearts of the people. Prone to wander, they needed and they received this inward monitor. Thus God showed His great forbearance, by even extending His grace and giving more help because the need was greater.

From this picture of the wilderness life we are led on to the conquest of the Promised Land. The Israelites overthrow the kings east of the Jordan, and take possession of their territories. Growing in numbers, after a time they are strong enough to cross the Jordan, seize the land of Canaan, and subdue the aboriginal inhabitants. Then we see them settling down in their new home and inheriting the products of the labours of their more civilised predecessors. All this is a further proof of the favour of God. Yet again the dreadful scene of ingratitude is repeated, and that in an aggravated form. A wild fury of rebellion takes hold of the wicked people. They rise up against their God, fling His Torah behind their backs, murder the prophets He sends to warn them, and sink down into the greatest wickedness. The head and front of their offence is the rejection of the sacred Torah. The word Torah—law or instruction—must here be taken in its widest sense to comprehend both the utterances of the prophets and the tradition of the priests, although it is represented to the contemporaries of Ezra by its crown and completion, the Pentateuch. In this second act of heightened energy on both sides, while the characters of the actors are developing with stronger features, we have a third scene—forgiveness and deliverance from God.

Then the action moves more rapidly. It becomes almost confused. In general terms, with a few swift

strokes, the author sketches a succession of similar movements—indeed he does little more than hint at them. We cannot see how often the threefold process was repeated; only we perceive that it always recurred in the same form. Yet the very monotony deepens the impression of the whole drama—so madly persistent was the backsliding habit of Israel, so grandly continuous was the patient long-suffering of God. We lose all count of the alternating scenes of light and darkness as we look at them down the long vista of the ages. And yet it is not necessary that we should assort them. The perspective may escape us; all the more must we feel the force of the process which is characterised by so powerful a unity of movement.

Coming nearer to his own time, the author of the prayer expands into detail again. While the kingdom lasted God did not cease to plead with His people. They disregarded His voice, but His Spirit was in the prophets, and the long line of heavenly messengers was a living testimony to the Divine forbearance. Heedless of this greatest and best means of bringing them back to their forsaken allegiance, the Jews were at length given over to the heathen. Yet that tremendous calamity was not without its mitigations. They were not utterly consumed. Even now God did not forsake them. He followed them into their captivity. This was apparent in the continuous advent of prophets—such as the Second Isaiah and Ezekiel—who appeared and delivered their oracles in the land of exile; it was most gloriously manifest in the return under Cyrus. Such long-continued goodness, beyond the utmost excess of the nation's sin, surpassed all that could have been hoped for. It went beyond the promises of God; it could not be wholly comprehended in His faithfulness.

Therefore another Divine attribute is now revealed. At first the prayer made mention of God's righteousness, which was seen in the gift of Canaan as a fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, so that the author remarked, in regard to the performance of the Divine word, "for Thou art righteous." But now he reflects on the greater kindness, the uncovenanted kindness of the Exile and the Return; "for Thou art a gracious and merciful God."* We can only account for such extended goodness by ascribing it to the infinite love of God.

Having thus brought his review down to his own day, in the concluding passage of the prayer the author appeals to God with reference to the present troubles of His people. In doing so he first returns to his contemplation of the nature of God. Three Divine characteristics rise up before him,—first, *majesty* ("the great, the mighty, the terrible God"); second, *fidelity* (keeping "covenant"); third, *compassion* (keeping "mercy").† On this threefold plea he beseeches God that all the national trouble which has been endured since the first Assyrian invasion may not "seem little" to Him. The greatness of God might appear to induce disregard of the troubles of His poor human children, and yet it would really lead to the opposite result. It is only the limited faculty that cannot stoop to small things because its attention is confined to large affairs. Infinity reaches to the infinitely little as readily as to the infinitely great. With the appeal for compassion goes a confession of sin, which is national rather than personal. All sections of the community on which the calamities have fallen—with the significant exception of the prophets who had possessed God's Spirit, and

* Neh. ix. 31. † Neh. ix. 32.

who had been so grievously persecuted by their fellow-countrymen—all are united in a common guilt. The solidarity of the Jewish race is here apparent. We saw in the earlier case of the sin-offering that the religion of Israel was national rather than personal. The punishment of the captivity was a national discipline; now the confession is for national sin. And yet the sin is confessed distributively, with regard to the several sections of society. We cannot feel our national sin in the bulk. It must be brought home to us in our several walks of life.

After this confession the prayer deplores the present state of the Jews. No reference is now made to the temporary annoyance occasioned by the attacks of the Samaritans. The building of the walls has put an end to that nuisance. But the permanent evil is more deeply rooted. The Jews are mournfully conscious of their subject state beneath the Persian yoke. They have returned to their city; but they are no more free men than they were in Babylon. Like the *fellaheen* of Syria to-day, they have to pay heavy tribute, which takes the best of the produce of their labour. They are subject to the conscription, having to serve in the armies of the Great King—Herodotus tells us that there were "Syrians of Palestine" in the army of Xerxes.* Their cattle are seized by the officers of the government, arbitrarily, "at their pleasure." Did Nehemiah know of this complaint? If so, might there not be some ground for the suspicion of the informers after all? Was that suspicion one reason for his recall to Susa? We cannot answer these questions. As to the prayer, this leaves the whole case with God. It would have

* Herodotus, vii. 89.

been dangerous to have said more in the hearing of the spies who haunted the streets of Jerusalem. And it was needless. It is not the business of prayer to try to move the hand of God. It is enough that we lay bare our state before Him, trusting His wisdom as well as His grace—not dictating to God, but confiding in Him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE COVENANT.

NEHEMIAH X.

THE tenth chapter of "Nehemiah" introduces us to one of the most vital crises in the History of Israel. It shows us how the secret cult of the priests of Jehovah became a popular religion. The process was brought to a focus in the public reading of The Law; it was completed in the acceptance of The Law which the sealing of the covenant ratified. This event may be compared with the earlier scene, when the law-book discovered in the temple by Hilkiah was accepted and enforced by Josiah. Undoubtedly that book is included in Ezra's complete edition of The Law. Generations before Ezra, then, though nothing more than Deuteronomy may have been forthcoming, that vital section of The Law, containing as it did the essential principles of Judaism, was adopted. But how was this result brought about? Not by the intelligent conviction, nor by the voluntary action of the nation. It was the work of a king, who thought to drive his ideas into his subjects. No doubt Josiah acted in a spirit of genuine loyalty to Jehovah; and yet the method he followed could not lead to success. The transient character of his spasmodic attempt to save his people at the eleventh hour, followed by the total

collapse of the fabric he had built up, shows how insecure a foundation he had obtained. It was a royal reformation, not a revival of religion on the part of the nation. We have an instance of a similar course of action in the English reformation under Edward VI., which was swept away in a moment when his Catholic sister succeeded to the throne, because it was a movement originating in the court and not supported by the country, as was that under Elizabeth when Mary had opened the eyes of the English nation to the character of Romanism.

But now a very different scene presents itself to our notice. The sealing of the covenant signifies the voluntary acceptance of The Law by the people of Israel, and their solemn promise to submit to its yoke. There are two sides to this covenant arrangement. The first is seen in the conduct of the people in entering into the covenant. This is absolutely an act of free will on their part. We have seen that Ezra never attempted to force The Law upon his fellow-countrymen —that he was slow in producing it; that when he read it he only did so at the urgent request of the people; and that even after this he went no further, but left it with the audience for them to do with it as they thought fit. It came with the authority of the will of God, which to religious men is the highest authority; but it was not backed by the secular arm, even though Ezra possessed a *firman* from the Persian court which would have justified him in calling in the aid of the civil government. Now the acceptance of The Law is to be in the same spirit of freedom. Of course somebody must have started the idea of forming a covenant. Possibly it was Nehemiah who did so. Still this was when the people were ripe for entering into it, and the

whole process was voluntary on their part. The only religion that can be real to us is that which we believe in with personal faith and surrender ourselves to with willing obedience. Even when the law is recorded on parchment, it must also be written on the fleshy table of the heart if it is to be effective.

But there is another side to the covenant-sealing. The very existence of a covenant is significant. The word "covenant" suggests an agreement between two parties, a mutual arrangement to which each is pledged. So profound was the conviction of Israel that in coming to an agreement with God it was not possible for man to bargain with his Maker on equal terms, that in translating the Hebrew name for covenant into Greek the writers of the Septuagint did not use the term that elsewhere stands for an agreement among equals (*συνθήκη*), but employed one indicative of an arrangement made by one party to the transaction and submitted to the other (*διαθήκη*). The covenant, then, is a Divine disposition, a Divine ordinance. Even when, as in the present instance, it is formally made by men, this is still on lines laid down by God; the covenanting is a voluntary act of adhesion to a law which comes from God. Therefore the terms of the covenant are fixed, and not to be discussed by the signatories. This is of the very essence of Judaism as a religion of Divine law. Then though the sealing is voluntary, it entails a great obligation; henceforth the covenant people are bound by the covenant which they have deliberately entered into. This, too, is a characteristic of the religion of law. It is a bondage, though a bondage willingly submitted to by those who stoop to its yoke. To St. Paul it became a crushing slavery. But the burden was not felt at first, simply because neither the range of The Law,

nor the searching force of its requirements, nor the weakness of men to keep their vows, was yet perceived by the sanguine Jews who so unhesitatingly surrendered to it. As we look back to their position from the vantage ground of Christian liberty, we are astounded at the Jewish love of law, and we rejoice in our freedom from its irksome restraints. And yet the Christian is not an antinomian; he is not a sort of free lance, sworn to no obedience. He too has his obligation. He is bound to a lofty service—not to a law, indeed, but to a personal Master; not in the servitude of the letter, but, though with the freedom of the spirit, really with far higher obligations of love and fidelity than were ever recognised by the most rigorous covenant-keeping Jews. Thus he has a new covenant, sealed in the blood of his Saviour; and his communion with his Lord implies a sacramental vow of loyalty. The Christian covenant, however, is not visibly exhibited, because a formal pledge is scarcely in accordance with the spirit of the gospel. We find it better to take a more self-distrustful course, one marked by greater dependence of faith on the preserving grace of God, by turning our vows into prayers. While the Jews "entered into a curse and into an oath" to keep the law, we shrink from anything so terrible; yet our duty is not the less because we limit our professions of it.

The Jews were prepared for their covenant by two essential preliminaries. The first was knowledge. The reading of The Law preceded the covenant, which was entered into intelligently. There is no idea of what is called "implicit faith." The whole situation is clearly surveyed, and The Law is adopted with a consciousness of what it means as far as the understanding of its requirements by the people will yet penetrate into

its signification. It is necessary to count the cost before entering on a course of religious service. With a view to this our Lord spoke of the "narrow way" and the "cross," much to the disappointment of His more sanguine disciples, but as a real security for genuine loyalty. With religion, of all things, it is foolish to take a leap in the dark. Judaism and Christianity absolutely contradict the idea that "Ignorance is the mother of devotion."

The second preparation consisted in the moral effect on the Jews of the review of their history in the light of religion, and their consequent confession of sin and acknowledgment of God's goodness. Here was the justification for the written law. The old methods had failed. The people had not kept the desultory *Torah* of the prophets. They needed a more formal system of discipline. Here too were the motives for adopting the covenant. Penitence for the nation's miserable past prompted the desire for a better future, and gratitude for the overwhelming goodness of God roused an enthusiasm of devotion. Nothing urges us to surrender ourselves to God so much as these two motives—our repentance and His goodness. They are the two powerful magnets that draw souls to Christ.

The chronicler—always delighting in any opportunity to insert his lists of names—records the names of the signatories of the covenant. The seals of these men were of importance so long as the original document to which they were affixed was preserved, and so long as any recognised descendants of the families they represented were living. To us they are of interest because they indicate the orderly arrangement of the nation and the thoroughness of procedure in the ratification of the covenant. Nehemiah, who is again called by his

Persian title Tirshatha, appears first. This fact is to be noted as a sign that as yet even in a religious document the civil ruler takes precedence of the hierarchy. At present it is allowed for a layman to head the list of leading Israelites. We might have looked for Ezra's name in the first place, for he it was who had taken the lead in the introduction of The Law, while Nehemiah had retreated into the background during the whole month's proceedings. But the name of Ezra does not appear anywhere on the document. The probable explanation of its absence is that only heads of houses affixed their seals, and that Ezra was not accounted one of them. Nehemiah's position in the document is official. The next name, Zedekiah, possibly stands for Zadok the Scribe mentioned later,* who may have been the writer of the document, or perhaps Nehemiah's secretary. Then come the priests. It was not the business of these men to assist in the reading of The Law. While the Levites acted as scribes and instructors of the people, the priests were chiefly occupied with the temple ritual and the performance of the other ceremonies of religion. The Levites were teachers of The Law; the priests were its administrators. In the question of the execution of The Law, therefore, the priests have a prominent place, and after remaining in obscurity during the previous engagements, they naturally come to the front when the national acceptance of the Pentateuch is being confirmed. The hierarchy is so far established that, though the priests follow the lay ruler of Jerusalem, they precede the general body of citizens, and even the nobility. No doubt many of the higher families were in the line of the priesthood. But

* Neh. xiii. 13.

this was not the case with all of them, and therefore we must see here a distinct clerical precedence over all but the very highest rank.

Most of the names in this list of priests occur again in a list of those who came up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua,* from which fact we must infer that they represent families, not individuals. But some of the names in the other list are missing here. A most significant omission is that of the high-priest. Are we merely to suppose that some names have dropped out in course of transcription? Or was the high-priest, with some of his brethren, unwilling to sign the covenant? We have had earlier signs that the high-priest did not enjoy the full confidence of Ezra.† The heads of the hierarchy may have resented the popularising of The Law. Since formerly, while the people were often favoured with the moral Torah of the prophets, the ceremonial Torah of the priests was kept among the *arcana* of the initiated, the change may not have been pleasing to its old custodians. Then these conservatives may not have approved of Ezra's latest recension of The Law. A much more serious difficulty lay with those priests who had contracted foreign marriages, and who had favoured the policy of alliance with neighbouring peoples which Ezra had so fiercely opposed. Old animosities from this source were still smouldering in the bosoms of some of the priests. But apart from any specific grounds of disaffection, it is clear that there never was much sympathy between the scribes and the priests. Putting all these considerations together, it is scarcely too much to conjecture that the absentees were designedly holding back when

* Neh. xii. 1-7.

† *E.g.*, Ezra viii. 33; where the high-priest is passed over in silence.

the covenant was signed. The only wonder is that the disaffected minority was so small.

According to the new order advised by Ezekiel and now established, the Levites take the second place and come after the priests, as a separate and inferior order of clergy. Yet the hierarchy is so far honoured that even the lowest of the clergy precede the general body of the laity. We come down to the porters, the choristers, and the temple-helots before we hear of the mass of the people. When this lay element is reached, the whole of it is included. Men, women, and children are all represented in the covenant. The Law had been read to all classes, and now it is accepted by all classes. Thus again the rights and duties of women and children in religion are recognised, and the thoroughly domestic character of Judaism is provided for. There is a solidity in the compact. A common obligation draws all who are included in it together. The population generally follows the example of the leaders. "They clave to their brethren, their nobles,"* says the chronicler. The most effective unifying influence is a common enthusiasm in a great cause. The unity of Christendom will only be restored when the passion of loyalty to Christ is supreme in every Christian, and when every Christian acknowledges that this is the case with all his brother-Christians.

It is clear that the obligation of the covenant extended to the whole law. This is called "God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God."† Nothing can be clearer than that in the eyes of the chronicler, at all events, it was the Mosaic law. We have seen many indications of this view in the chronicler's narrative.

* Neh. x. 29. † *Ibid.*

Can we resist the conclusion that it was held by the contemporaries of Ezra and Nehemiah? We are repeatedly warned against the mistake of supposing that the Pentateuch was accepted as a brand-new document. On the contrary, it was certainly received on the authority of the Mosaic origin of its contents, and because of the Divine authority that accompanied this origin. By the Jews it was viewed as the law of Moses, just as in Roman jurisprudence every law was considered to be derived from the "Twelve Tables." No doubt Ezra also considered it to be a true interpretation of the genius of Mosaism adapted to modern requirements. If we keep this clearly before our minds, the Pentateuchal controversy will lose its sharpest points of conflict. The truth here noted once more is so often disregarded that it needs to be repeatedly insisted on at the risk of tautology.

After the general acceptance of the whole law, the covenant specifies certain important details. First comes the separation from the heathen—the burning question of the day. Next we have Sabbath observance —also made especially important, because it was distinctive of Judaism as well as needful for the relief of poor and oppressed labourers. But the principal part of the schedule is occupied with pledges for the provision of the temple services. Immense supplies of fuel would be required for the numerous sacrifices, and therefore considerable prominence was given to the collecting of wood; subsequently a festival was established to celebrate this action. According to a later tradition, Nehemiah kindled the flames on the great altar of the burnt-offerings with supernatural fire.* Like the

* 2 Macc. i. 19-22.

Vestal virgins at Rome, the temple officials were to tend the sacred fire as a high duty, and never let it go out. "Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually,"* was the Levitical rule. Thus the very greatest honour was given to the rite of sacrifice. As the restoration of the religion of Israel began with the erection of the altar before the temple was built, so the preservation of that religion was centred in the altar fire—and so, we may add, its completion was attained in the supreme sacrifice of Christ.

Finally, special care was taken for what we may call "Church finance" in the collection of the tithes. This comes last; yet it has its place. Not only is it necessary for the sake of the work that is to be carried on; it is also important in regard to the religious obligation of the worshipper. The cry for a cheap religion is irreligious, because real religion demands sacrifices, and, indeed, necessarily promotes the liberal spirit from which those sacrifices flow. But if the contributions are to come within the range of religious duties, they must be voluntary. Clearly this was the case with the Jewish tithes, as we may see for two reasons. First, they were included in the covenant; and adhesion to this was entirely voluntary. Secondly, Malachi rebuked the Jews for withholding the payment of tithes as a sin against God,† showing that the payment only rested on a sense of moral obligation on the part of the people. It would have been difficult to go further while a foreign government was in power, even if the religious leaders had desired to do so. Moreover, God can only accept the offerings that are given freely with heart and will, for all He cares for is the spirit of the gift.

* Lev. vi. 13. † Mal. iii. 8-12.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOLY CITY.

NEHEMIAH vii. 1-4; xi.

WE have seen that though the two passages that deal with the sparsity of the population of Jerusalem are separated in our Bibles by the insertion of the section on the reading of The Law and the formation of the covenant, they are, in fact, so closely related that, if we skip the intermediate section, the one runs on into the other quite smoothly, as by a continuous narrative;* that is to say, we may pass from Nehemiah vii. 4 to Nehemiah xi. 1 without the slightest sign of a junction of separate paragraphs. So naive and crude is the chronicler's style, that he has left the raw edges of the narrative jagged and untrimmed, and thereby he has helped us to see distinctly how he has constructed his work. The foreign matter which he has inserted in the great gash is quite different in style and contents from that which precedes and follows it. This is marked with the Ezra stamp, which indicates that in all probability it is founded on notes left by the scribe; but the broken narrative in the midst of which it appears is derived from Nehemiah, the first part consisting of memoirs

* Pages 271-273.

written by the statesman himself, and the second part being an abbreviation of the continuation of Nehemiah's writing. The beginning of this second part directly links it on to the first part, for the word "and" has no sort of connection with the immediately preceding Ezra section, while it exactly fits into the broken end of the previous Nehemiah section; only with his characteristic indifference to secular affairs, in comparison with matters touching The Law and the temple worship, the chronicler abbreviates the conclusion of Nehemiah's story. It is easy to see how he constructs his book in this place. He has before him two documents—one written by Nehemiah, the other written either by Ezra or by one of his close associates. At first he follows Nehemiah, but suddenly he discovers that he has reached the date when the Ezra record should come in. Therefore, without any concern for the irregularity of style that he is perpetrating, he suddenly breaks off Nehemiah's narrative to insert the Ezra material, at the end of which he simply goes back to the Nehemiah document, and resumes it exactly where he has left it, except that now, after introducing it in the language of the original writer, he compresses the fragment, so that the composition passes over into the third person. It is not to be supposed that this is done arbitrarily or for no good reason. The chronicler here intends to tell his story in chronological order. He shows that the course of events referred to at the opening of the seventh chapter really was broken by the occurrences the record of which then follows. The interruptions in the narrative just correspond to the real interruptions in the historical facts. History is not a smooth-flowing river; its course is repeatedly broken by rocks and shoals,

and sometimes entirely deflected by impassable cliffs. In the earlier part of the narrative we read of Nehemiah's anxiety on account of the sparsity of the population of Jerusalem; but before he was able to carry out any plans for the increase of the number of inhabitants the time of the great autumn festivals was upon him, and the people were eager to take advantage of the public holidays that then fell due in order to induce Ezra to read to them the wonderful book he had brought up from Babylon years before, and of which he had not yet divulged the contents. This was not waste time as regards Nehemiah's project. Though the civil governor stood in the background during the course of the great religious movement, he heartily seconded the clerical leaders of it in their efforts to enlighten and encourage the people, and he was the first to seal the covenant which was its fruit. Then the people who had been instructed in the principles of their faith and consecrated to its lofty requirements were fitted to take their places as citizens of the Holy City.

The "population question" which troubled Nehemiah at this time is so exactly opposite to that which gives concern to students of social problems in our own day, that we need to look into the circumstances in which it emerged in order to understand its bearings. The powerful suction of great towns, depleting the rural districts and gorging the urban, is a source of the greatest anxiety to all who seriously contemplate the state of modern society; and consequently one of the most pressing questions of the day is how to scatter the people over the land. Even in new countries the same serious condition is experienced—in Australia, for instance, where the crowding of the people into

Melbourne is rapidly piling up the very difficulties sanguine men hoped the colonies would escape. If we only had these modern facts to draw upon, we might conclude that a centripetal movement of population was inevitable. That it is not altogether a novelty we may learn from the venerable story of the Tower of Babel, from which we may also gather that it is God's will that men should spread abroad and replenish the earth.

It is one of the advantages of the study of history that it lifts us out of our narrow grooves and reveals to us an immense variety of modes of life, and this is not the least of the many elements of profit that come to us from the historical embodiment of revelation as we have it in the Bible. The width of vision that we may thus attain to will have a double effect. It will save us from being wedded to a fixed policy under all circumstances; and it will deliver us from the despair into which we should settle down, if we did not see that what looks to us like a hopeless and interminable drift in the wrong direction is not the permanent course of human development. It is necessary to consider that if the dangers of a growing population are serious, those of a dwindling population are much more grave.

Nehemiah was in a position to see the positive advantages of city life, and he regarded it as his business to make the most of them for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen. We have seen that each of the three great expeditions from Babylon up to Jerusalem had its separate and distinctive purpose. The aim of the first, under Zerubbabel and Jeshua, was the rebuilding of the temple; the object of the second, under Ezra, was the establishment of The Law; and the end of the third,

under Nehemiah, was the fortification and strengthening of the city. This end was before the patriotic statesman's mind from the very first moment when he was startled and grieved at hearing the report of the ruinous condition of the walls of Jerusalem which his brother brought to him in the palace at Susa. We may be sure that with so practical a man it was more than a sentimental reverence for venerated sites that led Nehemiah to undertake the great work of fortifying the city of his fathers' sepulchres. He had something else in view than to construct a huge mausoleum. His aim had too much to do with the living present to resemble that of Rizpah guarding the corpses of her sons from the hovering vultures. Nehemiah believed in the future of Jerusalem, and therefore he would not permit her to remain a city of ruins, unguarded, and a prey to every chance comer. He saw that she had a great destiny yet to fulfil, and that she must be made strong if ever she was to accomplish it. It is to the credit of his keen discernment that he perceived this essential condition of the firm establishment of Israel as a distinctive people in the land of Palestine. Ezra was too literary, too abstract, too much of an idealist to see it, and therefore he struggled on with his teaching and exhorting till he was simply silenced by the unlooked-for logic of facts. Nehemiah perfectly comprehended this logic, and knew how to turn it to the advantage of his own cause.

The fierce antagonism of the Samaritans is an indirect confirmation of the wisdom of Nehemiah's plans. Sanballat and his associates saw clearly enough that, if Jerusalem were to become strong again, the metropolitan pre-eminence—which had shifted from this city to Samaria after the Babylonian conquest—would

revert to its old seat among the hills of Judah and Benjamin. Now this pre-eminence was of vital importance to the destinies of Israel. It was not possible for the people in those early days to remain separate and compact, and to work out their own peculiar mission, without a strong and safe centre. We have seen Judaism blossoming again as a distinctive phenomenon in the later history of the Jews, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. But this most wonderful fact in ethnology is indirectly due to the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. The readiness to intermarry with foreigners shown by the contemporaries of the two great reformers proves conclusively that, unless the most stringent measures had been taken for the preservation of its distinctive life, Israel would have melted away into the general mass of amalgamated races that made up the Chaldæan and Persian empires. The military protection of Jerusalem enabled her citizens to maintain an independent position in defiance of the hostile criticism of her neighbours, and the civil importance of the city helped to give moral weight to her example in the eyes of the scattered Jewish population outside her walls. Then the worship at the temple was a vital element in the newly modelled religious organisation, and it was absolutely essential that this should be placed beyond the danger of being tampered with by foreign influences, and at the same time that it should be adequately supported by a sufficent number of resident Jews. Something like the motive that induces the Pope to desire the restoration of the temporal power of the Papacy—perfectly wise and reasonable from his point of view—would urge the leaders of Judaism to secure as far as possible the political independence of the centre of their religion.

It is to be observed that Nehemiah desired an increase of the population for the immediate purpose of strengthening the garrison of Jerusalem. The city had been little better than "a lodge in a garden of cucumbers" till her new governor had put forth stupendous efforts which resulted in converting her into a fortress. Now the fortress required to be manned. Everything indicates anxiety about the means of defence. Nehemiah placed two men at the head of this vital function—his own brother Hanani, whose concern about the city had been evinced in his report of its condition to Nehemiah at Susa, and Hananiah the commandant of the citadel. This Hananiah was known to be "faithful"—a great point while traitors in the highest places were intriguing with the enemy. He was also exceptionally God-fearing, described as one who "feared God above many" —another point recognised by Nehemiah as of supreme importance in a military officer. Here we have an anticipation of the Puritan spirit which required the Cromwellian soldiers to be men of sterling religious character. Nehemiah would have had no hesitation if he had been placed in the dilemma of the Athenians when they were called to choose between Aristides the good and Themistocles the clever. With him—much as brains were needed, and he showed this in his own sleepless astuteness—integrity and religion were the first requisites for an office of responsibility.

The danger of the times is further indicated by the new rule with regard to the opening of the gates. Oriental custom would have permitted this at dawn. Nehemiah would not allow it before the full daytime, "until the sun be hot." Levites were to mount guard by day—an indication of the partially ecclesiastical character of the civil government. The city was a sort

of extended temple, and its citizens constituted a Church watched over by the clergy. At night the citizens themselves were to guard the walls, as more watchers would be needed during the hours of darkness to protect the city against an assault by surprise. Now these facts point to serious danger and arduous toil. Naturally many men would shrink from the yoke of citizenship under such circumstances. It was so much pleasanter, so much easier, so much quieter for people to live in the outlying towns and villages, near to their own farms and vineyards. Therefore it was necessary to take a tenth of the rural population in order to increase that of the town. The chronicler expressly notes that "the rulers of the people" were already dwelling in Jerusalem. These men realised their responsibility. The officers were to the fore; the men who needed to be urged to their duty were the privates. No doubt there was more to attract the upper classes to the capital, while their agricultural occupations would naturally draw many of the poorer people into the country, and we must not altogether condemn the latter as less patriotic than the former. We cannot judge the relative merits of people who act differently till we know their several circumstances. Still it remains true that it is often the man with the one talent who buries his charge, because with him the sense of personal insignificance becomes a temptation to the neglect of duty. Hence arises one of the most serious dangers to a democracy. When this danger is not mastered, the management of public affairs falls into the hands of self-seeking politicians, who are ready to wreck the state for their private advantage. It is most essential, therefore, that a public conscience should be aroused and that people should realise their duty to their

community—to the town in which they live, the country to which they belong.

Nehemiah's simple expedient succeeded, and praise was earned by those Jews who yielded to the sacred decision of the lot and abandoned their pleasant rustic retreats to take up the more trying posts of sentinels in a garrison. According to his custom, the chronicler proceeds to show us how the people were organised. His many names have long ceased to convey the living interest that must have clustered round them when the families they represented were still able to recognise their ancestors in the roll of honour. But incidentally he imports into his register a note about the Great King's concern for the temple worship, from which we learn that Artaxerxes made special provision for the support of the choristers, and that he entertained a Jewish representative in his court to keep him informed on the condition of the distant city. Thus we have another indication of the royal patronage which was behind the whole movement for the restoration of the Jews. Nevertheless the piteous plaint of the Jews on their great fast day shows us that their servitude galled them sorely. Men who could utter that cry would not be bribed into a state of cheerful satisfaction by the kindness of their master in subscribing to their choir fund, although doubtless the contribution was made in a spirit of well-meaning generosity. The ideal City of God had not yet appeared, and the hint of the dependence of Jerusalem on royal patronage is a significant reminder of the sad fact. It never did appear, even in the brightest days of the earthly Jerusalem. But God was teaching His people through the history of that unhappy city how high the true ideal must be, and so preparing them for the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

Now we may take the high ideal that was slowly emerging throughout the ages, and see how God intends to have it realised in the City of God which, from the days of Saint Augustine, we have learnt to look for in the Church of Christ. The two leading thoughts connected with the Holy City in the phase of her history that is now passing under our notice are singularly applicable to the Christian community.

First, *the characteristic life of the city.* Enclosed within walls, the city gained a peculiar character and performed a distinctive mission of her own. Our Lord was not satisfied to rescue stray sheep on the mountains only to brand them with His mark and then turn them out again to graze in solitude. He drew them as a flock after Himself, and His disciples gathered them into the fold of Church fellowship. This is of as vital importance to the cause of Christianity as the civic organisation of Jerusalem was to that of Judaism. The Christian City of God stands out before the world on her lofty foundation, the Rock of Ages—a beacon of separation from sin, a testimony to the grace of God, a centre for the confession of faith, a home for social worship, a rallying point for the forces of holy warfare, a sanctuary for the helpless and oppressed.

Second, *the public duty of citizenship.* The reluctance of Christians to accept the responsibilities of Church membership may be compared to the backwardness of the Jews to dwell in their metropolis. Like Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah, the City of God to-day is an outpost in the battle-field, a fortress surrounded by the enemy's territory. It is traitorous to retire to the calm cultivation of one's private garden-plot in the hour of stress and strain when the citadel is threatened on all sides. It is the plain duty of the people of God to

mount guard and take their turn as watchmen on the walls of the Holy City.

May we carry the analogy one step further? The king of Persia, though his realm stretched from the Tigris to the Ægean, could not give much effectual help to the true City of God. But the Divine King of kings sends her constant supplies, and she too, like Jerusalem, has her Representative at court, One who ever lives to make intercession for her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEGINNINGS.

NEHEMIAH xii. 27-47.

A CURIOUS feature of the history of the restoration of Israel already met with several times is postponement. Thus in the days of Cyrus Zerubbabel leads up an expedition for the express purpose of building the temple at Jerusalem; but the work is not executed until the reign of Darius. Again, Ezra brings the book of The Law with him when he comes to the city; yet he does not find an opportunity for publishing it till some years later. Once more, Nehemiah sets to work on the fortifications with the promptitude of a practical man and executes his task with astonishing celerity; still, even in his case the usual breach of sequence occurs; here, too, we have interruption and the intrusion of alien matters, so that the crowning act of the dedication of the walls is delayed.

In this final instance we do not know how long a postponement there was. Towards the end of his work the chronicler is exceptionally abrupt and disconnected. In the section xii. 27-43 he gives us an extract from Nehemiah's memoirs, but without any note of time. The preservation of another bit of the patriot's original writing is interesting, not only because of its assured historicity, but further because exceptional

importance is given to the records that have been judged worthy of being extracted and made portions of permanent scripture, although other sources are only used by the chronicler as materials out of which to construct his own narrative in the third person. While we cannot assign its exact date to the subject of this important fragment, one thing is clear from its position in the story of the days of Nehemiah. The reading of The Law, the great fast, the sealing of the covenant, the census, and the regulations for peopling Jerusalem, all came between the completion of the fortifications and the dedication of them. The interruption and the consequent delay were not without meaning and object. After what had occurred in the interval, the people were better prepared to enter into the ceremony of dedication with intelligence and earnestness of purpose. This act, although it was immediately directed to the walls, was, as a matter of fact, the re-consecration of the city; because the walls were built in order to preserve the distinct individuality, the unique integrity of what they included. Now the Jews needed to know The Law in order to understand the destiny of Jerusalem; they needed to devote themselves personally to the service of God, so that they might carry out that destiny; and they needed to recruit the forces of the Holy City, for the purpose of giving strength and volume to its future. Thus the postponement of the dedication made that event, when it came about, a much more real thing than it would have been if it had followed immediately on the building of the walls. May we not say that in every similar case the personal consecration must precede the material? The city is what its citizens make it. They, and not its site or its buildings, give it its true character. Jerusalem

and Babylon, Athens and Rome, are not to be distinguished in their topography and architecture in anything approaching the degree in which they are individualised by the manners and deeds of their respective peoples. Most assuredly the New Jerusalem will just reflect the characters of her citizens. This City of God will be fair and spotless only when they who tread her streets are clad in the beauty of holiness. In smaller details, too, and in personal matters, we can only dedicate aright that which we are handling in a spirit of earnest devotion. The miserable superstition that clouds our ideas of this subject rises out of the totally erroneous notion that it is possible to have holy things without holy persons, that a mystical sanctity can attach itself to any objects apart from an intelligent perception of some sacred purpose for which they are to be used. This materialistic notion degrades religion into magic; it is next door to fetichism.

It is important, then, that we should understand what we mean by dedication. Unfortunately in our English Bible the word "dedicate" is made to stand for two totally distinct Hebrew terms, one * of which means to "consecrate," to make holy, or set apart for God; while the other † means to "initiate," to mark the beginning of a thing. The first is used of functions of ritual, priestly and sacrificial; but the second has a much wider application, one that is not always directly connected with religion. Thus we meet with this second word in the regulations of Deuteronomy which lay down the conditions on which certain persons are to be excused from military service. The man who has built a new house but who has not "dedicated" it is placed

* קִדֵּשׁ, Piel of קדשׁ

† חָנַךְ

side by side with one who has planted a vineyard and with a third who is on the eve of his marriage.* Now the first word—that describing real consecration—is used of the priests' action in regard to their portion of the wall, and in this place our translators have rendered it "sanctified." † But in the narrative of the general dedication of the walls the second and more secular word is used. The same word is used, however, we must notice, in the account of the dedication of the temple. ‡ In both these cases, and in all other cases of the employment of the word, the chief meaning conveyed by it is just initiation. § It signalises a commencement. Therefore the ceremony at the new walls was designed in the first instance to direct attention to the very fact of their newness, and to call up those thoughts and feelings that are suitable in the consideration of a time of commencement. We must all acknowledge that such a time is one for very earnest thought. All our beginnings in life—the birth of a child, a young man's start in the world, the wedding that founds the home, the occupation of a new house, the entrance on a fresh line of business—all such beginnings come to rouse us from the indifference of routine, to speak to us with the voice of Providence, to bid us look forward and prepare ourselves for the future. We have rounded a corner, and a new vista has opened up to our view. As we gaze down the long aisle we must be heedless indeed if we can contemplate the vision without a thrill of emotion, without a thought of anticipation. The new departure in external affairs is an opportunity for a new turn in our

* Deut. xx. 5-7. † Neh. iii. 1. ‡ Ezra vi. 16.

§ Still in the earlier scene, the dedication of the temple, the sacred use of the building makes the act of initiation to be equivalent to consecration. There the connection gives the special association.

inner life, and it calls for a reconsideration of our resources and methods.

One of the charms of the Bible is that, like nature, it is full of fresh starts. Inasmuch as a perennial breath of new life plays among the pages of these ancient scriptures, we have only to drink it in to feel what inspiration there is here for every momentous beginning. Just as the fading, dank autumn gives way to the desolation of winter in order that in due time the sleeping seeds and buds may burst out in the birth of spring with the freshness of Eden, God has ordained that the decaying old things of human life shall fall away and be forgotten, while He calls us into the heritage of the new—giving a new covenant, creating a new heart, promising a new heaven and a new earth. The mistake of our torpor and timidity is that we will cling to the rags of the past and only patch them with shreds of the later age, instead of boldly flinging them off to clothe ourselves in the new garment of praise which is to take the place of the old spirit of heaviness.

The method in which a new beginning was celebrated by the Jews in relation to their restored walls is illustrative of the spirit in which such an event should always be contemplated.

In the first place, as a preparation for the whole of the subsequent ceremonies, the priests and Levites carried out a great work of purification. They began with themselves, because the men who are first in any dealings with religion must be first in purity. Judged by the highest standard, the only real difference of rank in the Church is determined by varying degrees of holiness; merely official distinctions and those that arise from the unequal distribution of gifts cannot

affect anybody's position of honour in the sight of God. The functions of the recognised ministry, in particular, demand purity of character for their right discharge. They that bear the vessels of the Lord must be clean. And not only so in general; especially in the matter of purification is it necessary that those who carry out the work should first be pure themselves. What here applied to priests and Levites ceremonially applies in prosaic earnest to all who feel called to purge society in the interest of true morality. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? The leaders of moral reforms must be themselves morally clean. Only regenerate men and women can regenerate society. If the salt has lost its savour it will not arrest corruption in the sacrifice that is salted with it. But the purification does not cease with the leaders. In ceremonial symbolism all the people and even the very walls are also cleansed. This is done in view of the new departure, the fresh beginning. Such an occasion calls for much heart-searching and spiritual cleansing—a truth which must have been suggested to the minds of thoughtful people by the Levitical ceremonies. It is a shame to bring the old stains into the new scenes. The fresh, clean start calls for a new and better life.

Next, it is to be observed, there was an organised procession round the walls, a procession that included citizens of every rank—princes, priests, Levites, and representatives of the general community, described as "Judah and Benjamin." Starting at the west end of the city, these people were divided into two sections, one led by Nehemiah going round by the north, and the other conducted by Ezra proceeding by the south, so that they met at the eastern side of the city; where

opposite the Mount of Olives and close to the temple, they all united in an enthusiastic outburst of praise. This arrangement was not carried out for any of the idle ends of a popular pageant—to glorify the processionists, or to amuse the spectators. It was to serve an important practical purpose. By personal participation in the ceremony of initiation, all sections of the community would be brought to perceive its real significance. Since the walls were in the keeping of the citizens, it was necessary that the citizens should acknowledge their privileges and responsibilities. Men and women need to come individually and directly face to face with new conditions of life. Mere dulness of imagination encourages the lazy sense of indifference with which so many people permit themselves to ignore the claims of duty, and the same cause accounts for a melancholy failure to appreciate the new blessings that come from the untiring bounty of God.

In the third place, the behaviour of the processionists invites our attention. The whole ceremony was one of praise and gratitude. Levites were called in from the outlying towns and villages where they had got themselves homes, and even from that part of the Jordan valley that lay nearest to Jerusalem. Their principal function was to swell the chorus of the temple singers. Musical instruments added emphasis to the shout of human voices; clashing cymbals and finer toned harps supported the choral song with a rich and powerful orchestral accompaniment, which was augmented from another quarter by a young band of trumpeters consisting of some of the priests' sons. The immediate aim of the music and singing was to show forth the praises of God. The two great companies were to give thanks while they went round the walls. Sacrifices of

thanksgiving completed the ceremony when the processions were united and brought to a standstill near the temple. The thanksgiving would arise out of a grateful acknowledgment of the goodness of God in leading the work of building the walls through many perils and disappointments to its present consummation. Rarely does anything new spring up all of a sudden without some relation to our own past life and action; but even that which is the greatest novelty and wonder to us must have a cause somewhere. If we have done nothing to prepare for the happy surprise, God has done much. Thus the new start is an occasion for giving thanks to its great Originator. But the thankfulness also looks forward. The city was now in a very much more hopeful condition than when Nehemiah took his lonely night ride among its ghostly ruins. By this time it was a compact and strongly fortified centre, with solid defences and a good body of devoted citizens pledged to do their part in pursuing its unique destiny. The prospect of a happy future which this wonderful transformation suggested afforded sufficient reasons for the greatest thankfulness. The spirit of praise thus called forth would be one of the best guarantees of the fulfilment of the high hopes that it inspired. There is nothing that so surely foredooms people to failure as a despairing blindness to any perception of their advantages. The grateful soul will always have most ground for a renewal of gratitude. It is only just and reasonable that God should encourage those of His children who acknowledge His goodness, with fresh acts of favour over and above what He does for all in making His sun to shine and His rain to fall on the bad as well as the good. But apart from considerations of self-interest, the true spirit of praise will

delight to pour itself out in adoration of the great and good Father of all blessings. It is a sign of sin or selfishness or unbelief when the element of praise fails in our worship. This is the purest and highest part of a religious service, and it should take the first place in the estimation of the worshippers. It will do so directly a right sense of the goodness of God is attained. Surely the best worship is that in which man's needs and hopes and fears are all swallowed up in the vision of God's love and glory, as the fields and woods are lost in a dim purple haze when the sky is aglow with the rose and saffron of a brilliant sunset.

Further, it is to be observed that a note of gladness rings through the whole ceremony. The account of the dedication concludes with the perfectly jubilant verse, "And they offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced; for God had made them rejoice with great joy; and the women also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off." * The joy would be mingled with the praise, because when people see the goodness of God enough to praise Him from their hearts they cannot but rejoice; and then the joy would react on the praise, because the more blessedness God sends the more heartily must His grateful children thank Him. Now the outburst of joy was accompanied with sacrifices. In the deepest sense, a sense almost unknown till it was revealed by Christ, there is a grand, solemn joy in sacrifice. But even to those who have only reached the Jewish standpoint, the self-surrender expressed by a ceremonial sacrifice as a symbol of glad thankfulness in turn affects the offerer so as to heighten his gladness. No doubt there were mundane and

* Neh. xii. 43.

secular elements in this joy of a jubilant city. A laborious and dangerous task had been completed the city had been fortified and made able to defend itself against the horrors of an assault; there was a fair prospect of comfort and perhaps even honour for the oppressed and despised citizens of Jerusalem. But beyond all this and beneath it, doubtless many had discovered Nehemiah's great secret for themselves; they had found their strength in the joy of the Lord. In face of heathenish pleasures and superstitious terrors it was much to know that God expected His holy people to be happy, and more, to find that the direct road to happiness was holiness. This was the best part of the joy which all the people experienced with more or less thought and appreciation of its meaning. Joy is contagious. Here was a city full of gladness. Nehemiah expressly takes note of the fact that the women and children shared in the universal joy. They must have been among the most pitiable sufferers in the previous calamities; and they had taken their place in the great *Ecclesia* when The Law was read, and again when the sad confession of the nation's sin was poured forth. It was well that they should not be left out of the later scene, when joy and praise filled the stage. For children especially who would not covet this gladness in religion? It is only a miserable short-sightedness that allows any one to put before children ideas of God and spiritual things which must repel, because of their gloom and sternness. Let us reserve these ideas for the castigation of Pharisees. A scene of joyous worship is truly typical of the perfect City of God of which children are the typical citizens—the New Jerusalem of whose inhabitants it is said, "God shall wipe away all tears from their

eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away."

Lastly, following his extract from the memoirs of Nehemiah, the chronicler shows how the glad spirit of this great day of dedication flowed out and manifested itself in those engagements to which he was always delighted to turn—the Levitical services. Thus the tithe gathering and the temple psalmody were helped forward. The gladness of religion is not confined to set services of public worship; but when those services are held it must flood them with the music of praise. It is impossible for the worship of God's house to be limp and depressed when the souls of His children are joyous and eager. A half-hearted, melancholy faith may be content with neglected churches and slovenly services—but not a joyous religion which men and women love and glory in. While "The joy of the Lord" has many happy effects on the world, it also crowds churches, fills treasuries, sustains various ministries, inspires hymns of praise, and brings life and vigour into all the work of religion.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE RIGOUR OF THE REFORMER.

NEHEMIAH xiii.

THERE is no finality in history. The chapter that seems to be rounded off with a perfect conclusion always leaves room for an appendix, which in its turn may serve as an introduction to another chapter. Ezra's and Nehemiah's work seemed to have reached its climax in the happy scene of the dedication of the walls. All difficulties had vanished; the new order had been greeted with widespread enthusiasm; the future promised to be smooth and prosperous. If the chronicler had laid down his pen at this point, as any dramatist before Ibsen who was not bound by the exigencies of prosaic facts would have done, his work might have presented a much more artistic appearance than it now wears. And yet it would have been artificial, and therefore false to the highest art of history. In adding a further extract from Nehemiah's memoirs that discloses a revival of the old troubles, and so shows that the evils against which the reformers contended had not been stamped out, the writer mars the literary effect of his record of their triumph; but, at the same time, he satisfies us that he is in contact with real life, its imperfections and its disappointments.

It is not easy to settle the time of the incident

mentioned in chapter xiii. 1-3. The phrase "on that day" with which the passage opens seems to point back to the previous chapter. If so it cannot be taken literally, because what it describes must be assigned to a later period than the contents of the paragraph that follows it. It forms an introduction to the extract from Nehemiah's memoirs, and its chronological position is even later than the date of the first part of the extract, because that begins with the words "And before this,"* *i.e.*, before the incident that opens the chapter. Now it is clear that Nehemiah's narrative here refers to a time considerably after the transactions of the previous chapter, inasmuch as he states that when the first of the occurrences he now records happened he was away in the court of Artaxerxes.† Still later, then, must that event be placed *before* which this new incident occurred. We might perhaps suppose that the phrase "at that day" is carried over directly from the chronicler's original source and belongs to its antecedents in that document; but so clumsy a piece of joinery is scarcely admissible. It is better to take the phrase quite generally. Whatever it meant when first penned, it is clear that the events it introduces belong only indefinitely to the times previously mentioned. We are really landed by them in a new state of affairs. Here we must notice that the introductory passage is immediately connected with the Nehemiah record. It tells how the law from Deuteronomy requiring the exclusion of the Ammonite and the Moabite was read and acted on. This is to be remembered when we are studying the subsequent events.

When Nehemiah's extended leave of absence had

* Neh. xiii. 4. † Neh. xiii. 6.

come to an end, or when perhaps he had been expressly summoned back by Artaxerxes, his return to Babylon was followed by a melancholy relapse in the reformed city of Jerusalem. This is not by any means astonishing. Nothing so hinders and distresses the missionary as the repeated outbreak of their old heathen vices among his converts. The drunkard cannot be reckoned safe directly he has signed the pledge. Old habits may be damped down without being extinguished, and when this is the case they will flame up again as soon as the repressive influence is removed. In the present instance there was a distinct party in the city, consisting of some of the most prominent and influential citizens, which disapproved of the separatist, puritanical policy of the reformers and advocated a more liberal course. Some of its members may have been conscientious men, who honestly deplored what they would regard as the disastrous state of isolation brought about by the action of Ezra and Nehemiah. After having been silenced for a time by the powerful presence of the great reformers, these people would come out and declare themselves when the restraining influences were removed. Meanwhile we hear no more of Ezra. Like Zerubbabel in the earlier period, he drops out of the history without a hint as to his end. He may have returned to Babylon, thinking his work complete; possibly he had been recalled by the king.

It is likely that some rumours of the declension of Jerusalem reached Nehemiah at the Persian court. But he did not discover the whole extent of this retrograde movement until he was once more in the city, with a second leave of absence from Artaxerxes. Then there were four evils that he perceived with great grief.

The first was that Tobiah had got a footing in the city. In the earlier period this "servant" had been carrying on intrigues with some members of the aristocracy. The party of opposition had done its best to represent him in a favourable light to Nehemiah, and all the while this party had been traitorously keeping Tobiah informed of the state of affairs in the city. But now a further step was taken. Though one of the three leading enemies of Nehemiah, the ally and supporter of the Samaritan governor Sanballat, this man was actually permitted to have a lodging in the precincts of the temple. The locality was selected, doubtless, because it was within the immediate jurisdiction of the priests, among whom the Jewish opponents of Nehemiah were found. It is as though, in his quarrel with Henry, Thomas à Becket had lodged a papal envoy in the cathedral close at Canterbury. To a Jew who did not treat the ordinances of religion with the Sadducean laxity that was always to be found in some of the leading members of the priesthood, this was most abhorrent. He saw in it a defilement of the neighbourhood of the temple, if not of the sacred enclosure itself, as well as an insult to the former governor of the city. Tobiah may have used his room for the purpose of entertaining visitors in state; but it may only have been a warehouse for trade stores, as it had previously been a place in which the bulky sacrificial gifts were stowed away. Such a degradation of it, superseding its previous sacred use, would aggravate the evil in the sight of so strict a man as Nehemiah.

The outrage was easily accounted for. Tobiah was allied by marriage to the priest who was the steward of this chamber. Thus we have a clear case of trouble arising out of the system of foreign marriages which

Ezra had so strenuously opposed. It seems to have opened the eyes of the younger reformer to the evil of these marriages, for hitherto we have not found him taking any active part in furthering the action of Ezra with regard to them. Possibly he had not come across an earlier instance. But now it was plain enough that the effect was to bring a pronounced enemy of all he loved and advocated into the heart of the city, with the rights of a tenant, too, to back him up. If "evil communications corrupt good manners," this was most injurious to the cause of the reformation. The time had not arrived when a generous spirit could dare to welcome all-comers to Jerusalem. The city was still a fortress in danger of siege. More than that, it was a Church threatened with dissolution by reason of the admission of unfit members. Whatever we may say to the social and political aspects of the case, ecclesiastically regarded, laxity at the present stage would have been fatal to the future of Judaism, and the mere presence of such a man as Tobiah, openly sanctioned by a leading priest, was a glaring instance of laxity; Nehemiah was bound to stop the mischief.

The second evil was the neglect of the payments due to the Levites. It is to be observed again that the Levites are most closely associated with the reforming position. Religious laxity and indifference had had an effect on the treasury for which these men were the collectors. The financial thermometer is a very rough test of the spiritual condition of a religious community, and we often read it erroneously, not only because we cannot gauge the amount of sacrifice made by people in very different circumstances, nor just because we are unable to discover the motives that prompt the giving of

alms "before men"; but also, when every allowance is made for these causes of uncertainty, because the gifts which are usually considered most generous rarely involve enough strain and effort to bring the deepest springs of life into play. And yet it must be allowed that a declining subscription list is usually to be regarded as one sign of waning interest on the part of the supporters of any public movement. When we consider the matter from the other side, we must acknowledge that the best way to improve the pecuniary position of any religious enterprise is not to work the exhausted pump more vigorously, but to drive the well deeper and tap the resources of generosity that lie nearer the heart—not to beg harder, but to awaken a better spirit of devotion.

The third indication of backsliding that vexed the soul of Nehemiah was Sabbath profanation. He saw labour and commerce both proceeding on the day of rest—Jews treading the winepress, carrying their sheaves, lading their asses, and bringing loads of wine, grapes, and figs, and all sorts of wares, into Jerusalem for sale; and fishmongers and pedlars from Tyre—not, of course, themselves to be blamed for failing to respect the festival of a people whose religion they did not share—pouring into the city, and opening their markets as on any weekday. Nehemiah was greatly alarmed. He went at once to the nobles, who seem to have been governing the city, as a sort of oligarchy, during his absence, and expostulated with them on their danger of provoking the wrath of God again, urging that Sabbath-breaking had been one of the offences which had called down the judgment of Heaven on their fathers. Then he took means to prevent the coming of foreign traders on the Sabbath, by ordering the gates

to be kept closed from Friday evening till the sacred day was over. Once or twice these people came up as usual, and camped just outside the city; but as this was disturbing to the peace of the day, Nehemiah threatened that if they repeated the annoyance he would lay hands on them. Lastly, he charged the Levites, first to cleanse themselves that they might be ready to undertake a work of purification, and then to take charge of the gates on the Sabbath and see that the day was hallowed in the cessation of all labour. Thus both by persuasion and by vigorous active measures Nehemiah put an end to the disorder.

The importance attached to this matter is a sign of the prominence given to Sabbath-keeping in Judaism. The same thing was seen earlier in the selection of the law of the Sabbath as one of the two or three rules to be specially noted, and to which the Jews were to particularly pledge themselves in the covenant.* Reference was then made to the very act of the Tyrians now complained of, the offering of wares and food for sale in Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. Putting these two passages together, we can see where the Sabbath-breaking came from. It was the invasion of a foreign custom—like the dreaded introduction of the "Continental Sunday" into England. Now to Nehemiah the fact of the foreign origin of the custom would be a heavy condemnation for it. Next to circumcision, Sabbath-keeping was the principal mark of the Jew. In the days of our Lord it was the most highly prized feature of the ancient faith. This was then so obvious that it was laid hold of by Roman satirists, who knew little about the strange traders in the *Ghetto* except that

* Neh. x. 31.

they "sabbatised." Nehemiah saw that if the sacred day of rest were to be abandoned, one of his bulwarks of separation would be lost. Thus for him, with his fixed policy, and in view of the dangers of his age, there was a very urgent reason for maintaining the Sabbath, a reason which of course does not apply to us in England to-day. We must pass on to the teaching of Christ to have this question put on a wider and more permanent basis. With that Divine insight of His which penetrated to the root of every matter, our Lord saw through the miserable formalism that made an idol of a day, and in so doing turned a boon into a burden; at the same time He rescued the sublimely simple truth which contains both the justification and the limitation of the Sabbath, when He declared, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." In resisting the rigour of legal-minded Sabbatarianism, the modern mind seems to have confined its attention to the second clause of this great utterance, to the neglect of its first clause. Is it nothing, then, that Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man"—not for the *Jew* only, but for *man*? Although we may feel free from the religion of law in regard to the observance of days as much as in other external matters, is it not foolish for us to minimise a blessing that Jesus Christ expressly declared to be for the good of the human race? If the rest day was needed by the Oriental in the slow-moving life of antiquity, is it any less requisite for the Western in the rush of these later times? But if it is necessary to our welfare, the neglect of it is sinful. Thus not because of the inherent sanctity of seasons, but on our Lord's own ground of the highest utilitarianism—a utilitarianism which reaches to other people, and even to animals, and affects the soul as well as the body

—the reservation of one day in seven for rest is a sacred duty. "The world is too much with us" for the six days. We can ill afford to lose the recurrent escape from its blighting companionship originally provided by the seventh and now enjoyed on our Sunday.

Lastly, Nehemiah was confronted by the social effects of foreign marriage alliances. These alliances had been contracted by Jews resident in the south-western corner of Judæa, who may not have come under the influence of Ezra's drastic reformation in Jerusalem, and who probably were not married till after that event. They afford another evidence of the counter current that was running so strongly against the regulations of the party of rigour while Nehemiah was away. The laxity of the border people may be accounted for without calling in any subtle motives. But their fault was shared by a member of the *gens* of the high-priest, who had actually wedded the daughter of Nehemiah's arch-enemy Sanballat! Clearly this was a political alliance, and it indicated a defiant reversal of the policy of the reformers in the very highest circles. The offender, after being expelled from Jerusalem, is said to have been the founder of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim.

Then the social mischief of the mixed marriages was showing itself in the corruption of the Hebrew language. The Philistine language was not allied to the Egyptian, as some have thought, nor was it Indo-Germanic, as others have supposed, but it was Semitic, and only a different dialect from the Hebrew; and yet the difficulty persons from the south of England feel in understanding the speech of Yorkshiremen in remote parts of the county will help us to account for a practical loss of mutual intelligence between people of different dialects,

when these dialects were still more isolated by having grown up in two separate and hostile nations. For the children of Jewish parents to be talking with the tones and accents of the hereditary enemies of Israel was intolerable. When he heard the hated sounds, Nehemiah simply lost his temper. With a curse on his lips he rushed at the fathers, striking them and tearing their hair. It was the rage of bitter disappointment; but behind it lay the grim set purpose in holding to which with dogged tenacity Ezra and Nehemiah saved Judaism from extinction. Separatism is never gracious; yet it may be right. The reformer is not generally of a mild temperament. We may regret his harshness; but we should remember that the world has only seen one perfectly meek and yet thoroughly effective Revolutionist, only one "Lamb of God" who could be also named "the Lion of the tribe of Judah."

The whole situation was disappointing to Nehemiah, and his memoir ends in a prayer beneath which we can detect an undertone of melancholy. Three times during this last section he appeals to God to remember him—not to wipe out his good deeds,* to spare him according to the greatness of the Divine mercy,† and finally to remember him for good.‡ The memories of the Jerusalem covenanters had been brief; during the short interval of their leader's absence they had forgotten his discipline and fallen back into negligent ways. It was vain to trust to the fickle fancies of men. With a sense of weary loneliness, taught to feel his own insignificance in that great tide of human life that flows on in its own course though the most prominent figures drop out of notice, Nehemiah

* Neh. xiii. 14. † Neh. xiii. 22. ‡ Neh. xiii. 31.

turned to his God, the one Friend who never forgets. He was learning the vanity of the world's fame; yet he shrank from the idea of falling into oblivion. Therefore it was his prayer that he might abide in the memory of God. This was by itself a restful thought. It is cheering to think that we may dwell in the memory of those we love. But to be held in the thought of God is to have a place in the heart of infinite love. And yet this was not the conclusion of the whole matter to Nehemiah. It is really nothing better than a frivolous vanity, that can induce any one to be willing to sacrifice the prospect of a real eternal life in exchange for the pallid shadow of immortality ascribed to the "choir invisible" of those who are only thought of as living in the memory of the world they have influenced enough to win "a niche in the temple of fame." What is fame to a dead man mouldering in his coffin? Even the higher thought of being remembered by God is a poor consolation in prospect of blank non-existence. Nehemiah expects something better, for he begs God to remember him in *mercy* and for *good*. It is a very narrow, prosaic interpretation of this prayer to say that he only means that he desires a blessing during the remainder of his life in the court at Susa. On the other hand, it may be too much to ascribe the definite hope of a future life to this Old Testament saint. And yet, vague as his thought may be, it is the utterance of a profound yearning of the soul that breaks out in moments of disappointment with an intensity never to be satisfied within the range of our cramped mortal state. In this utterance of Nehemiah we have, at least, a seed thought that should germinate into the great hope of immortality. If God could forget His children, we might expect them to perish, swept aside like the withered leaves of autumn.

But if He continues to remember them, it is not just to His Fatherhood to charge Him with permitting such a fate to fall upon His offspring. No human father who is worthy of the name would willingly let go the children whom he cherishes in mind and heart. Is it reasonable to suppose that the perfect Divine Father, who is both almighty and all-loving, would be less constant? But if He *remembers* His children, and remembers them *for good*, He will surely preserve them. If His memory is unfading, and if His love and power are eternal, those who have a place in His immortal thought must also have a share in His immortal life

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER: INTRODUCTORY.

THERE is a striking contrast between the high estimation in which the Book of Esther is now cherished among the Jews and the slighting treatment that is often meted out to it in the Christian Church. According to the great Maimonides, though the Prophets and the Hagiographa will pass away when the Messiah comes, this one book will share with The Law in the honour of being retained. It is known as "The Roll" *par excellence*, and the Jews have a proverb, "The Prophets may fail, but not The Roll." The peculiar importance attached to the book may be explained by its use in the Feast of Purim—the festival which is supposed to commemorate the deliverance of the Jews from the murderous designs of Haman, and their triumph over their Gentile enemies—for it is then read through in the synagogue. On the other hand, the grave doubts which were once felt by some of the Jews have been retained and even strengthened in the Christian Church. Esther was omitted from the Canon by some of the Oriental Fathers. Luther, with the daring freedom he always manifested in pronouncing sentence on the books of the Bible, after referring to the Second Book of Maccabees, says, "I am so hostile to this book and that of Esther, that I wish they did

not exist; they are too Judaising, and contain many heathenish improprieties." In our own day two classes of objections have been raised.

The first is historical. By many the Book of Esther is regarded as a fantastic romance; by some it is even relegated to the category of astronomical myths; and by others it is considered to be a mystical allegory. Even the most sober criticism is troubled at its contents. There can be no question that the Ahasuerus (*Ahashverosh*) of Esther is the well-known Xerxes of history, the invader of Greece who is described in the pages of Herodotus. But then, it is asked, what room have we for the story of Esther in the life of that monarch? His wife was a cruel and superstitious woman, named Amestris. We cannot identify her with Esther, because she was the daughter of one of the Persian generals, and also because she was married to Xerxes many years before the date of Esther's appearance on the scene. Two of her sons accompanied the expedition to Greece, which must have preceded the introduction of Esther to the harem. Moreover, it was contrary to law for a Persian sovereign to take a wife except from his own family, or from one of five noble families. Can Amestris be identified with Vashti? If so, it is certain that she must have been restored to favour, because Amestris held the queen's place in the later years of Xerxes, when the uxorious monarch came more and more under her influence. Esther, it is clear, can only have been a secondary wife in the eyes of the law, whatever position she may have held for a season in the court of the king. The predecessors of Xerxes had several wives; our narrative makes it evident that Ahasuerus followed the Oriental custom of keeping a large harem. To Esther, at best,

therefore, must be assigned the place of a favourite member of the seraglio.

Then it is difficult to think that Esther would not have been recognised as a Jewess by Haman, since the nationality of Mordecai, whose relationship to her had not been hidden, was known in the city of Susa. Moreover, the appalling massacre of "their enemies" by the Jews, carried on in cold blood, and expressly including "women and children," has been regarded as highly improbable. Finally, the whole story is so well knit together, its successive incidents arrange themselves so perfectly and lead up to the conclusion with such neat precision, that it is not easy to assign it to the normal course of events. We do not expect to meet with this sort of thing outside the realm of fairy tales. Putting all these facts together, we must feel that there is some force in the contention that the book is not strictly historical.

But there is another side to the question. This book is marvellously true to Persian manners. It is redolent of the atmosphere of the court at Susa. Its accuracy in this respect has been traced down to the most minute details. The character of Ahasuerus is drawn to the life; point after point in it may be matched in the Xerxes of Herodotus. The opening sentence of the book shows that it was written some time after the date of the king in whose reign the story is set, because it describes him in language only suited to a later period—"this is Ahasuerus which reigned from India unto Ethiopia," etc. But the writer could not have been far removed from the Persian period. The book bears evidence of having been written in the heart of Persia, by a man who was intimately acquainted with the scenery he described. There seems to be some

reason for believing in the substantial accuracy of a narrative that is so true to life in these respects.

The simplest way out of the dilemma is to suppose that the story of Esther stands upon a historical basis of fact, and that it has been worked up into its present literary form by a Jew of later days who was living in Persia, and who was perfectly familiar with the records and traditions of the reign of Xerxes. It is only an unwarrantable, *a priori* theory that can be upset by our acceptance of this conclusion. We have no right to demand that the Bible shall not contain anything but what is strictly historical. The Book of Job has long been accepted as a sublime poem, founded on fact perhaps, but owing its chief value to the divinely inspired thoughts of its author. The Book of Jonah is regarded by many cautious and devout readers as an allegory replete with important lessons concerning a very ugly aspect of Jewish selfishness. These two works are not the less valuable because men are coming to understand that their places in the library of the Hebrew Canon are not among the strict records of history. And the Book of Esther need not be dishonoured when some room is allowed for the play of the creative imagination of its author. In these days of the theological novel we are scarcely in a position to object to what may be thought to partake of the character of a romance, even if it is found in the Bible. No one asks whether our Lord's parable of the Prodigal Son was a true story of some Galilean family. The Pilgrim's Progress has its mission, though it is not to be verified by any authentic Annals of Elstow. It is rather pleasing than otherwise to see that the compilers of the Jewish Canon were not prevented by Providence from including a little anticipation of that work of the imagination which has

blossomed so abundantly in the highest and best culture of our own day.

A much more serious objection is urged on religious and moral grounds. It is indisputable that the book is not characterised by the pure and lofty spirit that gives its stamp to most of the other contents of the Bible. The absence of the name of God from its pages has been often commented on. The Jews long ago recognised this fact, and they tried to discover the sacred name in acrostic form at one or two places where the initial letters of a group of words were found to spell it. But quite apart from all such fantastic trifling, it has been customary to argue that, though unnamed, the presence of God is felt throughout the story in the wonderful Providence that protects the Jews and frustrates the designs of their arch-enemy Haman. The difficulty, however, is wider and deeper. There is no reference to religion, it is said, even where it is most called for; no reference to prayer in the hour of danger, when prayer should have been the first resource of a devout soul; in fact no indication of devoutness of thought or conduct. Mordecai fasts; we are not told that he prays. The whole narrative is immersed in a secular atmosphere. The religious character of apocryphal additions that were inserted by later hands is a tacit witness to a deficiency felt by pious Jews.

These charges have been met by the hypothesis that the author found it necessary to disguise his religious beliefs in a work that was to come under the eyes of heathen readers. Still we cannot imagine that an Isaiah or an Ezra would have treated his subject in the style of our author. It must be admitted that we have a composition on a lower plane than that of the prophetic and priestly histories of Israel. The theory that all

parts of the Bible are inspired with an equal measure of the Divine Spirit halts at this point. But what was to prevent a composition analogous to secular literature taking its place in the Hebrew Scriptures? Have we any evidence that the obscure scribes who arranged the Canon were infallibly inspired to include only devotional works? It is plain that the Book of Esther was valued on national rather than on religious grounds. The Feast of Purim was a social and national occasion of rejoicing, not a solemn religious ceremony like the Passover; and this document obtains its place of honour through its connection with the feast. The book, then, stands to the Hebrew Psalms somewhat as Macaulay's ballad of the Armada stands to the hymns of Watts and the Wesleys. It is mainly patriotic rather than religious; its purpose is to stir the soul of national enthusiasm through the long ages of the oppression of Israel.

It is not just, however, to assert that there are no evidences of religious faith in the story of Esther. Mordecai warns his cousin that if she will not exert herself to defend her people, "then shall there relief and deliverance arise to the Jews *from another place*."* What can this be but a reserved utterance of a devout man's faith in that Providence which has always followed the "favoured people"? Moreover, Mordecai seems to perceive a Divine destiny in the exaltation of Esther when he asks, "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"† The old commentators were not wrong when they saw the hand of Providence in the whole story. If we are to allow some licence to the imagination of the author

* Esther iv. 14. † *Ibid.*

in the shaping and arrangement of the narrative, we must assign to him also a real faith in Providence, for he describes a wonderful interlinking of events all leading up to the deliverance of the Jews. Long before Haman has any quarrel with Mordecai, the disgusting degradation of a drinking bout issues in an insult offered to a favourite queen. This shameful occurrence is the occasion of the selection of a Jewess, whose high position at court thus acquired enables her to save her people. But there is a secondary plot. Mordecai's discovery of the conspirators who would have assassinated Ahasuerus gives him a claim on the king's generosity, and so prepares the way, not only for his escape from the clutches of Haman, but also for his triumph over his enemy. And this is brought about—as we should say —"by accident." If Xerxes had not had a sleepless night just at the right time, if the part of his state records selected for reading to him in his wakefulness had not been just that which told the story of Mordecai's great service, the occasion for the turn in the tide of the fortune of the Jews would not have arisen. But all was so fitted together as to lead step by step on to the victorious conclusion. No Jew could have penned such a story as this without having intended his co-religionists to recognise the unseen presence of an over-ruling Providence throughout the whole course of events.

But the gravest charge has yet to be considered. It is urged against the Book of Esther that the moral tone of it is unworthy of Scripture. It is dedicated to nothing higher than the exaltation of the Jews. Other books of the Bible reveal God as the Supreme, and the Jews as His servants, often His unworthy and unfaithful servants. This book sets the Jews in the

first place; and Providence, even if tacitly recognised, is quite subservient to their welfare. Israel does not here appear as living for the glory of God, but all history works for the glory of Israel. In accordance with the spirit of the story, everything that opposes the Jews is condemned, everything that favours them is honoured. Worst of all, this practical deification of Israel permits a tone of heartless cruelty. The doctrine of separatism is monstrously exaggerated. The Jews are seen to be surrounded by their "enemies." Haman, the chief of them, is not only punished as he richly deserves to be punished, but he is made the recipient of unrestrained scorn and rage, and his sons are impaled on their father's huge stake. The Jews defend themselves from threatened massacre by a legalised slaughter of their "enemies." We cannot imagine a scene more foreign to the patience and gentleness inculcated by our Lord. Yet we must remember that the quarrel did not begin with the Jews; or if we must see the origin of it in the pride of a Jew, we must recollect that his offence was slight and only the act of one man. As far as the narrative shows, the Jews were engaged in their peaceable occupations when they were threatened with extinction by a violent outburst of the mad *Judenhetze* that has pursued this unhappy people through all the centuries of history. In the first instance, their act of vengeance was a measure of self-defence. If they fell upon their enemies with fierce anger, it was after an order of extermination had driven them to bay. If they indulged in a wholesale bloodshed, not even sparing women or children, exactly the same doom had been hanging over their own heads, and their own wives and children had been included in its ferocious sentence. This fact does not

excuse the savagery of the action of the Jews; but it amply accounts for their conduct. They were wild with terror, and they defended their homes with the fury of madmen. Their action did not go beyond the prayer of the Psalmist who wrote, in trim metrical order, concerning the hated Babylon—

"Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones
Against the rock." *

It is more difficult to account for the responsible part taken by Mordecai and Esther in begging permission for this awful massacre. The last pages of the Book of Esther reek with blood. A whole empire is converted into shambles for human slaughter. We turn with loathing from this gigantic horror, glad to take refuge in the hope that the author has dipped his brush in darker colours than the real events would warrant. Nevertheless such a massacre as this is unhappily not at all beyond the known facts of history on other occasions—not in its extent; the means by which it is here carried out are doubtless exceptional. Xerxes himself was so heartless and so capricious that any act of folly or wickedness could be credited of him.

After all that can be said for it, clearly this Book of Esther cannot claim the veneration that we attach to the more choice utterances of Old Testament literature. It never lifts us with the inspiration of prophecy; it never commands the reverence which we feel in studying the historical books. Yet we must not therefore assume that it has not its use. It illustrates an important phase in the development of Jewish life and thought. It also introduces us to characters and incidents that reveal human nature in very various lights. To con-

* Psalm cxxxvii. 9.

template such a revelation should not be without profit. After the Bible, what book should we regard as, on the whole, most serviceable for our enlightenment and nurture? Since next to the knowledge of God the knowledge of man is most important, might we not assign this second place of honour to the works of Shakespeare rather than to any theological treatise? And if so may we not be grateful that something after the order of a Shakespearian revelation of man is contained even in one book of the Bible?

It may be best to treat a book of this character in a different manner from the weighty historical work that precedes it, and, instead of expounding its chapters seriatim, to gather up its lessons in a series of brief character studies.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AHASUERUS AND VASHTI.

ESTHER i.

THE character of Ahasuerus illustrates the Nemesis of absolutism, by showing how unlimited power is crushed and dissolved beneath the weight of its own immensity. The very vastness of his domains overwhelms the despot. While he thinks himself free to disport according to his will, he is in reality the slave of his own machinery of government. He is so entirely dependent for information on subordinates, who can deceive him to suit their own private ends, that he often becomes a mere puppet of the political wire-pullers. In the fury of his passion he issues his terrible mandates, with the confidence of a master whose slightest whim is a law to the nations, and yet that very passion has been cleverly worked up by some of his servants, who are laughing in their sleeves at the simplicity of their dupe, even while they are fawning on him with obsequious flattery. In the story of Esther Ahasuerus is turned about hither and thither by his courtiers, according as one or another is clever enough to obtain a temporary hearing. In the opening scene he is the victim of a harem plot which deprives him of his favourite consort. Subsequently Haman poisons his mind with calumnies about a loyal, industrious

section of his subjects. He is only undeceived by another movement in the harem. Even the jealously guarded women of the royal household know more of the actual state of affairs in the outside world than the bewildered monarch. The king is so high above his realm that he cannot see what is going on in it; and all that he can learn about it passes through such a variety of intermediary agents that it is coloured and distorted in the process.

But this is not all. The man who is exalted to the pedestal of a god is made dizzy by his own altitude. Absolutism drove the Roman Emperor Caligula mad; it punished the Xerxes of Herodotus with childishness. The silly monarch who would decorate a tree with the jewellery of a prince in reward for its fruitfulness, and flog and chain the Hellespont as a punishment for its tempestuousness, is not fit to be let out of the nursery. Such conduct as his discovers an ineptitude that is next door to idiocy. When the same man appears on the pages of Scripture under the name of Ahasuerus, his weakness is despicable. The most keen-sighted ruler of millions is liable to be misinformed; the strongest administrator of a gigantic empire is compelled to move with difficulty in the midst of the elaborate organisation of his government. But Ahasuerus is neither keen-sighted nor strong. He is a victim of the last court intrigue, a believer in the idlest gossip; and he is worse, for even on the suppositions presented to him he behaves with folly and senseless fury. His conduct to Vashti is first insulting and then ungrateful; for fidelity to her worthless husband would prompt her to decline to risk herself among a crew of drunken revellers. His consent to the diabolical proposal of his grand vizier for a massacre, without an atom of proof that the

victims are guilty, exhibits a hopeless state of mental feebleness. His equal readiness to transfer the mandate of wholesale murder to persons described indefinitely as the "enemies" of these people shows how completely he is twisted about by the latest breeze. As the palace plots develop we see this great king in all his pride and majesty tossed to and fro like a shuttle-cock. And yet he can sting. It is a dangerous game for the players, and the object of it is to get the deadly venom of the royal rage to light on the head of the opposite party. We could not have a more certain proof of the vanity of "ambition that o'erleaps itself" than this conversion of immeasurable power into helpless weakness on the part of the Persian sovereign.

We naturally start with this glaring exhibition of the irony of fate in our study of Ahasuerus, because it is the most pronounced factor in his character and career. There are other elements of the picture, however, which are not, like this, confined to the abnormal experience of solitary rulers. Next to the revenge of absolutism on its possessor, the more vulgar effects of extravagant luxury and self-indulgence are to be seen in the degraded Persian court life. Very likely the writer of our Book of Esther introduces these matters with the primary object of enhancing the significance of his main theme by making us feel how great a danger the Jews were in, and how magnificent a triumph was won for them by the heroic Jewess of the harem. But the scene that he thus brings before us throws light on the situation all round. Xerxes' idea of unbridled power is that it admits of unlimited pleasure. Our author's picture of the splendid palace, with its richly coloured awnings stretched across from marble pillars to silver rods over the tesselated

pavement, where the most exalted guests recline in the shade on gold and silver seats, while they feast hugely and drink heavily day after day, shows us how the provinces were being drained to enrich the court, and how the royal treasury was being lavished on idle festivity. That was bad enough, but its effects were worse. The law was licence. "The drinking was according to the law," and this law was that there should be no limit to it, everybody taking just as much wine as he pleased. Naturally such a rule ostentatiously paraded before a dissolute company led to a scene of downright bestial debauchery. According to Herodotus, the Persians were addicted to drunkenness, and the incident described in the first chapter of Esther is quite in accordance with the Greek historian's account of the followers of Xerxes.

The worst effect of this vice of drunkenness is its degrading influence on the conduct and character of men. It robs its victims of self-respect and manliness, and sends them to wallow in the mire with swinish obscenity. What they would not dream of stooping to in their sober moments, they revel in with shameless ostentation when their brains are clouded with intoxicating drink. Husbands, who are gentle and considerate at other times, are then transformed into brutes, who can take pleasure in trampling on their wives. It is no excuse to plead that the drunkard is a madman unaccountable for his actions; he is accountable for having put himself in his degraded condition. If he is temporarily insane, he has poisoned his own intellect by swallowing a noxious drug with his eyes open. He is responsible for that action, and therefore he must be held to be responsible for its consequences. If he had given due consideration to his conduct, he might have foreseen

whither it was tending. The man who has been foolish enough to launch his boat on the rapids cannot divert its course when he is startled by the thunder of the falls he is approaching; but he should have thought of that before leaving the safety of the shore.

The immediate consequence of the disgusting degradation of drunkenness, in the case of Ahasuerus, is that the monarch grossly insults his queen. A moment's consideration would have suggested the danger as well as the scandal of his behaviour. But in his heedless folly the debauchee hurls himself over the precipice, from the height of his royal dignity down to the very pit of ignominy, and then he is only enraged that Vashti refuses to be dragged down with him. It is a revolting scene, and one to show how the awful vice of drunkenness levels all distinctions; here it outrages the most sacred rules of Oriental etiquette. The seclusion of the harem is to be violated for the amusement of the dissolute king's boon companions.

In the story of Esther poor Vashti's fall is only introduced in order to make way for her Hebrew rival. But after ages have naturally sided with the wronged queen. Was it true modesty that prompted her daring refusal, or the lawful pride of womanhood? If so, all women should honour Vashti as the vindicator of their dues. Whatever "woman's rights" may be maintained in the field of politics, the very existence of the home, the basis of society itself, depends on those more profound and inalienable rights that touch the character of pure womanliness. The first of a woman's rights is the right to her own person. But this right is ignored in Oriental civilisation. The sweet English word "home" is unknown in the court of such a king as Ahasuerus. To think of it in this

connection is as incongruous as to imagine a daisy springing up through the boards of a dancing saloon. The unhappy Vashti had never known this choicest of words; but she may have had a due conception of a woman's true dignity, as far as the perverted ideas of the East permitted. And yet even here a painful suspicion obtrudes itself on our notice. Vashti had been feasting with the women of the harem when she received the brutal mandate from her lord. Had she too lost her balance of judgment under the bewitching influence of the wine-cup? Was she rendered reckless by the excitement of her festivities? Was her refusal the result of the factitious courage that springs from an unwholesome excitement or an equally effective mental stupor? Since one of the commonest results of intoxication is a quarrelsomeness of temper, it must be admitted that Vashti's flat refusal to obey may have some connection with her previous festivities. In that case, of course, something must be detracted from her glory as the martyr of womanliness. A horrible picture is this—a drunken king quarrelling with his drunken queen; these two people, set in the highest places in their vast realm, descending from the very pinnacle of greatness to grovel in debased intemperance! It would not be fair to the poor, wronged queen to assert so much without any clear evidence in support of the darker view of her conduct. Still it must be admitted that it is difficult for any of the members of a dissolute society to keep their garments clean. Unhappily it is only too frequently the case that, even in a Christian land, womanhood is degraded by becoming the victim of intemperance. No sight on earth is more sickening. A woman may be loaded with insults, and yet she may keep her soul white as the soul of

St. Agnes. It is not an outrage on her dignity, offered by the drunken king to his queen, that really marks her degradation. To all fair judgments, that only degrades the brute who offers it; but the white lily is bruised and trampled in the dust when she who wears it herself consents to fling it away.

The action of Ahasuerus on receipt of his queen's refusal reveals another trait in his weak character. Jealous eyes—always watching the favourite of the harem—discover an opportunity for a gleeful triumph. The advisers of the king are cunning enough to set the action of Vashti in the light of a public example. If a woman in so exalted a position is permitted to disobey her husband with impunity, other wives will appeal to her case and break out of bounds. It is a mean plea, the plea of weakness on the part of the speaker, Memucan, the last of the seven princes. Is this man only finding an excuse for the king? or may it be supposed that his thoughts are travelling away to a shrew in his own home? The strange thing is that the king is not content wreaking his vengeance on the proud Vashti. He is persuaded to utilise the occasion of her act of insubordination in order to issue a decree commanding the subjection of all wives to their husbands. The queen's conduct is treated as an instance of a growing spirit of independence on the part of the women of Persia, which must be crushed forthwith. One would think that the women were slaves, and that the princes were acting like the Romans when they issued repressive measures from dread of a "Servile War."

If such a law as this had ever been passed, we might well understand the complaint of those who say it is unjust that the function of legislation should be

monopolised by one sex. Even in the West, where women are comparatively free and are supposed to be treated on an equality with men, wrong is often done because the laws which concern them more especially are all made by men. In the East, where they are regarded as property, like their husbands' camels and oxen, cruel injustice is inevitable. But this injustice cannot go unpunished. It must react on its perpetrators, blunting their finer feelings, lowering their better nature, robbing them of those sacred confidences of husband and wife which never spring up on the territory of the slave-driver.

But we have only to consider the domestic edict of Ahasuerus to see its frothy vanity. When it was issued it must have struck everybody who had the faintest sense of humour as simply ridiculous. It is not by the rough instrumentality of the law that difficult questions of the relations between the sexes can be adjusted. The law can see that a formal contract is not violated with impunity. The law can protect the individual parties to the contract from the most brutal forms of cruelty—though even this is very difficult between husband and wife. But the law cannot secure real justice in the home. This must be left to the working of principles of righteousness and to the mutual considerateness of those who are concerned. Where these elements are wanting, no legislation on matrimony can restore the peace of a shattered home.

The order of Ahasuerus, however, was too indefinite to have very serious results. The tyrannical husband would not have waited for any such excuse as it might afford him for exacting obedience from his oppressed household drudge. The strong-minded woman would mock at the king's order, and have her own way as

before. Who could hinder her? Certainly not her husband. The yoke of years of meek submission was not to be broken in a day by a royal proclamation. But wherever the true idea of marriage was realised—and we must have sufficient faith in human nature to be assured that this was sometimes the case even in the realm of Xerxes—the husband and wife who knew themselves to be one, united by the closest ties of love and sympathy and mutual confidence, would laugh in their happiness and perhaps spare a thought of pity for the poor, silly king who was advertising his domestic troubles to the world, and thereby exhibiting his shallow notions of wedded life—blind, absolutely blind, to the sweet secret that was heaven to them.

We may be sure that the singular edict remained a dead letter. But the king would be master in his own palace. So Vashti fell. We hear no more of her, but we can guess too well what her most probable fate must have been.* The gates of death are never difficult to find in an Oriental palace; there are always jealous rivals eager to triumph over the fall of a royal favourite. Still Ahasuerus had been really fond of the queen who paid so dearly for her one act of independence. Repenting of his drunken rage, the king let his thoughts revert to his former favourite, a most dangerous thing for those who had hastened her removal. The easiest escape for them was to play on his coarse nature by introducing to his notice a bevy of girls from whom he might select a new favourite. This was by no means a dignified proceeding for Esther,

* On the supposition that the writer is not here recording historical facts in the life of Amestris, the real queen of Xerxes, who we know was not murdered.

the maiden to whom the first prize in the exhibition of beauty was awarded by the royal fancier. But it gave her the place of power from which to help her people in their hour of desperate need. And here we come to some redeeming features in the character of the king. He is not lacking in generosity; and he owns to a certain sense of justice. In the crowd of royal cares and pleasures, he has forgotten how an obscure Jew saved his life by revealing one of the many plots that make the pleasures of a despot as hollow a mockery as the feast of Damocles. On the chance discovery of his negligence, Ahasuerus hastens to atone for it with ostentatious generosity. Again, no sooner does he find that he has been duped by Haman into an act of cruel injustice than he tries to counteract the mischief by an equally savage measure of retaliation. A strange way of administering justice! Yet it must be admitted that in this the capricious, blundering king means honestly. The bitter irony of it all is that so awful a power of life and death should be lodged in the hands of one who is so totally incapacitated for a wise use of it.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HAMAN.

ESTHER iii. 1-6; v. 9-14; vii. 5-10.

HAMAN is the Judas of Israel. Not that his conduct or his place in history would bring him into comparison with the traitor apostle, for he was an open foe and a foreigner. But he is treated by popular Judaism as the Arch-Enemy, just as Judas is treated by popular Christianity. Like Judas, he has assigned to him a solitary pre-eminence in wickedness, which is almost inhuman. As in the case of Judas, there is thought to be no call for charity or mercy in judging Haman. He shares with Judas the curse of Cain. Boundless execration is heaped on his head. Horror and hatred have almost transformed him into Satan. He is called "The Agagite," an obscure title which is best explained as a later Jewish nickname derived from a reference to the king of Amalek who was hewn in pieces before the Lord. In the Septuagint he is surnamed "The Macedonian," because when that version was made the enemies of Israel were the representatives of the empire of Alexander and his successors. During the dramatic reading of the Book of Esther in a Jewish synagogue at the Feast of Purim, the congregation may be found taking the part of a chorus and exclaiming at every mention of the name of Haman, "May his name

be blotted out," "Let the name of the ungodly perish," while boys with mallets will pound stones and bits of wood on which the odious name is written. This frantic extravagance would be unaccountable but for the fact that the people whose "badge is sufferance" has summed up under the name of the Persian official the malignity of their enemies in all ages. Very often this name has served to veil a dangerous reference to some contemporary foe, or to heighten the rage felt against an exceptionally odious person by its accumulation of traditional hatred, just as in England on the fifth of November the "Guy" may represent some unpopular person of the day.

When we turn from this unamiable indulgence of spiteful passion to the story that lies behind it, we have enough that is odious without the conception of a sheer monster of wickedness, a very demon. Such a being would stand outside the range of human motives, and we could contemplate him with unconcern and detachment of mind, just as we contemplate the destructive forces of nature. There is a common temptation to clear ourselves of all semblance to the guilt of very bad people by making it out to be inhuman. It is more humiliating to discover that they act from quite human motives—nay, that those very motives may be detected, though with other bearings, even in our own conduct. For see what were the influences that stirred in the heart of Haman. He manifests by his behaviour the intimate connection between vanity and cruelty.

The first trait in his character to reveal itself is vanity, a most inordinate vanity. Haman is introduced at the moment when he has been exalted to the highest position under the king of Persia; he has just been made grand vizier. The tremendous honour turns

his brain. In the consciousness of it he swells out with vanity. As a necessary consequence he is bitterly chagrined when a porter does not do homage to him as to the king. His elation is equally extravagant when he discovers that he is to be the only subject invited to meet Ahasuerus at Esther's banquet. When the king inquires how exceptional honour is to be shown to some one whose name is not yet revealed, this infatuated man jumps to the conclusion that it can be for nobody but himself. In all his behaviour we see that he is just possessed by an absorbing spirit of vanity.

Then at the first check he suffers an annoyance proportionate to the boundlessness of his previous elation. He cannot endure the sight of indifference or independence in the meanest subject. The slender fault of Mordecai is magnified into a capital offence. This again is so huge that it must be laid to the charge of the whole race to which the offender belongs. The rage which it excites in Haman is so violent that it will be satisfied with nothing short of a wholesale massacre of men, women, and children. "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth"—when it is fanned by the breath of vanity. The cruelty of the vain man is as limitless as his vanity.

Thus the story of Haman illustrates the close juxtaposition of these two vices, vanity and cruelty; it helps us to see by a series of lurid pictures how fearfully provocative the one is of the other. As we follow the incidents, we can discover the links of connection between the cause and its dire effects.

In the first place, it is clear that vanity is a form of magnified egotism. The vain man thinks supremely of himself, not so much in the way of self-interest, but

more especially for the sake of self-glorification. When he looks out on the world, it is always through the medium of his own vastly magnified shadow. Like the Bröcken Ghost, this shadow becomes a haunting presence standing out before him in huge proportions. He has no other standard of measurement. Everything must be judged according as it is related to himself. The good is what gives him pleasure ; evil is what is noxious to him. This self-centred attitude, with the distortion of vision that it induces, has a double effect, as we may see in the case of Haman.

Egotism utilises the sufferings of others for its own ends. No doubt cruelty is often a consequence of sheer callousness. The man who has no perception of the pain he is causing or no sympathy with the sufferers will trample them under foot on the least provocation. He feels supremely indifferent to their agonies when they are writhing beneath him, and therefore he will never consider it incumbent on him to adjust his conduct with the least reference to the pain he gives. That is an entirely irrelevant consideration. The least inconvenience to himself outweighs the greatest distress of other people, for the simple reason that that distress counts as nothing in his calculation of motives. In Haman's case, however, we do not meet with this attitude of simple indifference. The grand vizier is irritated, and he vents his annoyance in a vast explosion of malignity that must take account of the agony it produces, for in that agony its own thirst for vengeance is to be slaked. But this only shows the predominant selfishness to be all the greater. It is so great that it reverses the engines that drive society along the line of mutual helpfulness, and thwarts and frustrates any amount of human life and

happiness for the sole purpose of gratifying its own desires.

Then the selfishness of vanity promotes cruelty still further by another of its effects. It destroys the sense of proportion. Self is not only regarded as the centre of the universe; like the sun surrounded by the planets, it is taken to be the greatest object, and everything else is insignificant when compared to it. What is the slaughter of a few thousand Jews to so great a man as Haman, grand vizier of Persia? It is no more than the destruction of as many flies in a forest fire that the settler has kindled to clear his ground. The same self-magnification is visibly presented by the Egyptian bas-reliefs, on which the victorious Pharaohs appear as tremendous giants driving back hordes of enemies or dragging pigmy kings by their heads. It is but a step from this condition to insanity, which is the apotheosis of vanity. The chief characteristic of insanity is a diseased enlargement of self. If he is elated the madman regards himself as a person of supreme importance—as a prince, as a king, even as God. If he is depressed he thinks that he is the victim of exceptional malignity. In that case he is beset by watchers of evil intent; the world is conspiring against him; everything that happens is part of a plot to do him harm. Hence his suspiciousness; hence his homicidal proclivities. He is not so mad in his inferences and conclusions. These may be rational and just, on the ground of his premisses. It is in the fixed ideas of these premisses that the root of his insanity may be detected. His awful fate is a warning to all who venture to indulge in the vice of excessive egotism.

In the second place, vanity leads to cruelty through

the entire dependence of the vain person on the good opinion of others; and this we may see clearly in the career of Haman. Vanity is differentiated from pride in one important particular—by its outward reference. The proud man is satisfied with himself; but the vain man is always looking outside himself with feverish eagerness to secure all the honours that the world can bestow upon him. Thus Mordecai may have been proud in his refusal to bow before the upstart premier: if so his pride would not need to court admiration; it would be self-contained and self-sufficient. But Haman was possessed by an insatiable thirst for homage. If a single obscure individual refused him this honour, a shadow rested on everything. He could not enjoy the queen's banquet for the slight offered him by the Jew at the palace gate, so that he exclaimed, "Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."* A selfish man in this condition can have no rest if anything in the world outside him fails to minister to his honour. While a proud man in an exalted position scarcely deigns to notice the "dim common people," the vain man betrays his vulgarity by caring supremely for popular adulation. Therefore while the haughty person can afford to pass over a slight with contempt, the vain creature who lives on the breath of applause is mortally offended by it and roused to avenge the insult with corresponding rage.

Selfishness and dependence on the external, these attributes of vanity inevitably develop into cruelty wherever the aims of vanity are opposed. And yet the vice that contains so much evil is rarely visited with a becoming

* Esther v. 13.

severity of condemnation. Usually it is smiled at as a trivial frailty. In the case of Haman it threatened the extermination of a nation, and the reaction from its menace issued in a terrific slaughter of another section of society. History records war after war that has been fought on the ground of vanity. In military affairs this vice wears the name of glory; but its nature is unaltered. For what is the meaning of a war that is waged for "la gloire" but one that is designed in order to minister to the vanity of the people who undertake it? A more fearful wickedness has never blackened the pages of history. The very frivolity of the occasion heightens the guilt of those who plunge nations into misery on such a paltry pretext. It is vanity that urges a savage warrior to collect skulls to adorn the walls of his hut with the ghastly trophies; it is vanity that impels a restless conqueror to march to his own triumph through a sea of blood; it is vanity that rouses a nation to fling itself on its neighbour in order to exalt its fame by a great victory. Ambition at its best is fired by the pride of power; but in its meaner forms ambition is nothing but an uprising of vanity clamouring for wider recognition. The famous invasion of Greece by Xerxes was evidently little better than a huge exhibition of regal vanity. The childish fatuity of the king could seek for no exalted ends. His assemblage of swarms of men of all races in an ill-disciplined army too big for practical warfare showed that the thirst for display occupied the principal place in his mind, to the neglect of the more sober aims of a really great conqueror. And if the vanity that lives on the world's admiration is so fruitful in evil when it is allowed to deploy on a large scale, its essential character will not be improved by the

limitation of its scope in humbler spheres of life. It is always mean and cruel.

Two other features in the character of Haman may be noticed. First, he shows energy and determination. He bribes the king to obtain the royal consent to his deadly design, bribes with an enormous present equal to the revenue of a kingdom, though Ahasuerus permits him to recoup himself by seizing the property of the proscribed nation. Then the murderous mandate goes forth: it is translated into every language of the subject peoples; it is carried to the remotest parts of the kingdom by the posts, the excellent organisation of which, under the Persian government has become famous. Thus far everything is on a large scale, betokening a mind of resource and daring. But now turn to the sequel. "And the king and Haman sat down to drink."* It is a horrible picture—the king of Persia and his grand vizier at this crisis deliberately abandoning themselves to their national vice. The decree is out; it cannot be recalled—let it go and do its fell work. As for its authors, they are drowning all thought of its effect on public opinion in the wine-cup; they are boozing together in a disgusting companionship of debauchery on the eve of a scene of wholesale bloodshed. This is what the glory of the Great King has come to. This is the anti-climax of his minister's vanity at the moment of supreme success. After such an exhibition we need not be surprised at the abject humiliation, the terror of cowardice, the frantic effort to extort pity from a woman of the very race whose extermination he had plotted, manifested by Haman in the hour of his exposure at Esther's banquet. Beneath

* Esther iii. 15.

all his braggart energy he is a weak man. In most cases self-indulgent, vain, and cruel people are essentially weak at heart.

Looking at the story of Haman from another point of view, we see how well it illustrates the confounding of evil devices and the punishment of their author in the drama of history. It is one of the most striking instances of what is called "poetic justice," the justice depicted by the poets, but not always seen in prosaic lives, the justice that is itself a poem because it makes a harmony of events. Haman is the typical example of the schemer who "falls into his own pit," of the villain who is "hoisted on his own petard." Three times the same process occurs, to impress its lesson with threefold emphasis. We have it first in the most moderate form when Haman is forced to assist in bestowing on Mordecai the honours he has been coveting for himself, by leading the horse of the hated Jew in his triumphant procession through the city. The same lesson is impressed with tragic force when the grand vizier is condemned to be impaled on the stake erected by him in readiness for the man whom he has been compelled to honour. Lastly, the design of murdering the whole race to which Mordecai belongs is frustrated by the slaughter of those who sympathise with Haman's attitude towards Israel—the "Hamanites," as they have been called. We rarely meet with such a complete reversal of fate, such a climax of vengeance. In considering the course of events here set forth we must distinguish between the old Jewish view of it and the significance of the process itself.

The Jews were taught to look on all this with fierce, vindictive glee, and to see in it the prophecy of the like fate that was treasured up for their enemies in later

times. This rage of the oppressed against their oppressors, this almost fiendish delight in the complete overthrow of the enemies of Israel, this total extinction of any sentiment of pity even for the helpless and innocent sufferers who are to share the fate of their guilty relatives—in a word, this utterly un-Christlike spirit of revenge, must be odious in our eyes. We cannot understand how good men could stand by with folded arms while they saw women and children tossed into the seething cauldron of vengeance; still less how they could themselves perpetrate the dreadful deed. But then we cannot understand that tragedy of history, the oppression of the Jews, and its deteriorating influence on its victims, nor the hard, cruel spirit of blank indifference to the sufferings of others that prevailed almost everywhere before Christ came to teach the world pity.

When we turn to the events themselves, we must take another view of the situation. Here was a rough and sweeping, but still a complete and striking punishment of cruel wrong. The Jews expected this too frequently on earth. We have learnt that it is more often reserved for another world and a future state of existence. Yet sometimes we are startled to see how apt it can be even in this present life. The cruel man breeds foes by his very cruelty; he rouses his own executioners by the rage that he provokes in them. It is the same with respect to many other forms of evil. Thus vanity is punished by the humiliation it receives from those people who are irritated at its pretensions; it is the last failing that the world will readily forgive, partly perhaps because it offends the similar failing in other people. Then we see meanness chastised by the odium it excites, lying by the distrust it provokes,

cowardice by the attacks it invites, coldness of heart by a corresponding indifference on the side of other people. The result is not always so neatly effected nor so visibly demonstrated as in the case of Haman; but the tendency is always present, because there is a Power that makes for righteousness presiding over society and inherent in the very constitution of nature.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

QUEEN ESTHER.

ESTHER iv. 10—v.; vii. 1-4; ix. 12, 13.

THE young Jewess who wins the admiration of the Persian king above all the chosen maidens of his realm, and who then delivers her people in the crisis of supreme danger at the risk of her own life, is the central figure in the story of the origin of Purim. It was a just perception of the situation that led to the choice of her name as the title of the book that records her famous achievements. Esther first appears as an obscure orphan who has been brought up in the humble home of her cousin Mordecai. After her guardian has secured her admission to the royal harem—a doubtful honour! we might think, but a very real honour in the eyes of an ancient Oriental—she receives a year's training with the use of the fragrant unguents that are esteemed so highly in a voluptuous Eastern court. We should not expect to see anything better than the charms of physical beauty after such a process of development, charms not of the highest type—languid, uscious, sensuous. The new name bestowed on this finished product of the chief art cultivated in the palace of Ahasuerus points to nothing higher, for "Esther" (*Istar*) is the name of a Babylonian goddess equivalent to the Greek "Aphrodite." And yet our

Esther is a heroine—capable, energetic, brave, and patriotic. The splendour of her career is seen in this very fact, that she does not succumb to the luxury of her surroundings. The royal harem among the lily-beds of Shushan is like a palace in the land of the lotus-eaters, "where it is always afternoon"; and its inmates, in their dreamy indolence, are tempted to forget all obligations and interests beyond the obligation to please the king and their own interest insecuring every comfort wealth can lavish on them. We do not look for a Boadicea in such a hot-house of narcotics. And when we find there a strong, unselfish woman such as Esther, conquering almost insuperable temptations to a life of ease, and choosing a course of terrible danger to herself for the sake of her oppressed people, we can echo the admiration of the Jews for their national heroine.

It is a woman, then, who plays the leading part in this drama of Jewish history. From Eve to Mary, women have repeatedly appeared in the most prominent places on the pages of Scripture. The history of Israel finds some of its most powerful situations in the exploits of Deborah, Jael, and Judith. On the side of evil, Delilah, Athaliah, and Jezebel are not less conspicuous. There was a freedom enjoyed by the women of Israel that was not allowed in the more elaborate civilisation of the great empires of the East, and this developed an independent spirit and a vigour not usually seen in Oriental women. In the case of Esther these good qualities were able to survive the external restraints and the internal relaxing atmosphere of her court life. The scene of her story is laid in the harem. The plots and intrigues of the harem furnish its principal incidents. Yet if Esther had been a shepherdess from the mountains of Judah, she could not have proved herself

more energetic. But her court life had taught her skill in diplomacy, for she had to pick her way among the greatest dangers like a person walking among concealed knives.

The beauty of Esther's character is this, that she is not spoiled by her great elevation. To be the one favourite out of all the select maidens of the kingdom, and to know that she owes her privileged position solely to the king's fancy for her personal charms, might have spoilt the grace of a simple Jewess. Haman, we saw, was ruined by his honours becoming too great for his self-control. But in Esther we do not light on a trace of the silly vanity that became the most marked characteristic of the grand vizier. It speaks well for Mordecai's sound training of the orphan girl that his ward proved to be of stable character where a weaker person would have been dizzy with selfish elation.

The unchanged simplicity of Esther's character is first apparent in her submissive obedience to her guardian even after her high position has been attained. Though she is treated as his Queen by the Great King, she does not forget the kind porter who has brought her up from childhood. In the old days she had been accustomed to obey this grave Jew, and she has no idea of throwing off the yoke now that he has no longer any recognised power over her. The habit of obedience persists in her after the necessity for it has been removed. This would not have been so remarkable if Esther had been a weak-minded woman, readily subdued and kept in subjection by a masterful will. But her energy and courage at a momentous crisis entirely forbid any such estimate of her character. It must have been genuine humility and unselfishness that prevented

her from rebelling against the old home authority when a heavy injunction was laid upon her. She undertakes the dangerous part of the champion of a threatened race solely at the instance of Mordecai. He urges the duty upon her, and she accepts it meekly. She is no rough Amazon. With all her greatness and power, she is still a simple, unassuming woman.

But when Esther has assented to the demands of Mordecai, she appears in her people's cause with the spirit of true patriotism. She scorns to forget her humble origin in all the splendour of her later advancement. She will own her despised and hated people before the king; she will plead the cause of the oppressed, though at the risk of her life. She is aware of the danger of her undertaking; but she says, "If I perish, I perish." The habit of obedience could not have been strong enough to carry her through the terrible ordeal if Mordecai's hard requirement had not been seconded by the voice of her own conscience. She knows that it is right that she should undertake this difficult and dangerous work. How naturally might she have shrunk back with regret for the seclusion and obscurity of the old days when her safety lay in her insignificance? But she saw that her new privileges involved new responsibilities. A royal harem is the last place in which we should look for the recognition of this truth. Esther is to be honoured because even in that palace of idle luxury she could acknowledge the stern obligation that so many in her position would never have glanced at. It is always difficult to perceive and act on the responsibility that certainly accompanies favour and power. This difficulty is one reason why "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom

of God." For while unusual prosperity brings unusual responsibility, simply because it affords unusual opportunities for doing good, it tends to cultivate pride and selfishness, and the miserable worldly spirit that is fatal to all high endeavour and all real sacrifice. Our Lord's great principle, "Unto whom much is given, of him shall much be required," is clear as a mathematical axiom when we look at it in the abstract; but nothing is harder than for people to apply it to their own cases. If it were freely admitted, the ambition that grasps at the first places would be shamed into silence. If it were generally acted on, the wide social cleft between the fortunate and the miserable would be speedily bridged over. The total ignoring of this tremendous principle by the great majority of those who enjoy the privileged positions in society is undoubtedly one of the chief causes of the ominous unrest that is growing more and more disturbing in the less favoured ranks of life. If this supercilious contempt for an imperative duty continues, what can be the end but an awful retribution? Was it not the wilful blindness of the dancers in the Tuileries to the misery of the serfs on the fields that caused revolutionary France to run red with blood?

Esther was wise in taking the suggestion of her cousin that she had been raised up for the very purpose of saving her people. Here was a faith, reserved and reticent, but real and powerful. It was no idle chance that had tossed her on the crest of the wave while so many of her sisters were weltering in the dark floods beneath. A clear, high purpose was leading her on to a strange and mighty destiny, and now the destiny was appearing, sublime and terrible, like some awful mountain peak that must be climbed unless the soul that has

come thus far will turn traitor and fall back into failure and ignominy. When Esther saw this, she acted on it with the promptitude of the founder of her nation, who esteemed "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt"; but with this difference, that, while Moses renounced his high rank in Pharaoh's court in order to identify himself with his people, the Queen of Ahasuerus retained her perilous position and turned it to good account in her saving mission. Thus there are two ways in which an exalted person may serve others. He may come down from his high estate like Moses, like Christ who was rich and for our sakes became poor; or he may take advantage of his privileged position to use it for the good of his brethren, regarding it as a trust to be held for those whom he can benefit, like Joseph, who was able in this way to save his father and his brothers from famine, and like Esther in the present case. Circumstances will guide the willing to a decision as to which of these courses should be chosen.

We must not turn from this subject without remembering that Mordecai plied Esther with other considerations besides the thought of her mysterious destiny. He warned her that she should not escape if she disowned her people. He expressed his confidence that if she shrank from her high mission deliverance would "come from another place," to her eternal shame. Duty is difficult, and there is often a call for the comparatively lower, because more selfish, considerations that urge to it. The reluctant horse requires the spur. And yet the noble courage of Esther could not have come chiefly from fear or any other selfish motive. It must have been a sense of her high duty and wonderful destiny that inspired her. There is no inspiration like that of the belief that we are called to a great mission.

This is the secret of the fanatical heroism of the Madhist dervishes. In a more holy warfare it makes heroes of the weakest.

Having once accepted her dreadful task, Esther proceeded to carry it out with courage. It was a daring act for her to enter the presence of the king unsummoned. Who could tell but that the fickle monarch might take offence at the presumption of his new favourite, as he had done in the case of her predecessor? Her lonely position might have made the strongest of women quail as she stepped forth from her seclusion and ventured to approach her lord. Her motive might be shamefully misconstrued by the low-minded monarch. Would the king hold out the golden sceptre to her? The chances of life and death hung on the answer to that question. Nehemiah, though a courageous man and a favourite of his royal master, was filled with apprehension at the prospect of a far less dangerous interview with a much more reasonable ruler than the half-mad Xerxes. These Oriental autocrats were shrouded in the terror of divinities. Their absolute power left the lives of all who approached them at the mercy of their caprice. Ahasuerus had just sanctioned a senseless, bloodthirsty decree. Very possibly he had murdered Vashti, and that on the offence of a moment. Esther was in favour, but she belonged to the doomed people, and she was committing an illegal action deliberately in the face of the king. She was Fatima risking the wrath of Bluebeard. We know how Nehemiah would have acted at this trying moment. He would have strengthened his heart with one of those sudden ejaculations of prayer that were always ready to spring to his lips on any emergency. It is not in accordance with the

secular tone of the story of Esther's great undertaking that any hint of such an action on her part should have been given. Therefore we cannot say that she was a woman of no religion, that she was prayerless, that she launched on this great enterprise entirely relying on her own strength. We must distinguish between reserve and coldness in regard to religion. The fire burns while the heart muses, even though the lips are still. At all events, if it is the intention of the writer to teach that Esther was mysteriously raised up for the purpose of saving her people, it is a natural inference to conclude that she was supported in the execution of it by unseen and silent aid. Her name does not appear in the honour roll of Hebrews xi. We cannot assert that she acted in the strength of faith. And yet there is more evidence of faith, even though it is not professed, in conduct that is true and loyal, brave and unselfish, than we can find in the loudest profession of a creed without the confirmation of corresponding conduct. "I will show my faith by my works," says St. James, and he may show it without once naming it.

It is to be noted, further, that Esther was a woman of resources. She did not trust to her courage alone to secure her end. It was not enough that she owned her people, and was willing to plead their cause. She had the definite purpose of saving them to effect. She was not content to be a martyr to patriotism; a sensible, practical woman, she did her utmost to be successful in effecting the deliverance of the threatened Jews. With this end in view, it was necessary for her to proceed warily. Her first step was gained when she had secured an audience with the king. We may surmise that her beautiful countenance was lit up

with a new, rare radiance when all self-seeking was banished from her mind and an intense, noble aim fired her soul; and thus, it may be, her very loftiness of purpose helped to secure its success. Beauty is a gift, a talent, to be used for good, like any other Divine endowment; the highest beauty is the splendour of soul that sometimes irradiates the most commonplace countenance, so that, like Stephen's, it shines as the face of an angel. Instead of degrading her beauty with foolish vanity, Esther consecrated it to a noble service, and thereby it was glorified. This one talent was not lodged with her useless.

The first point was gained in securing the favour of Ahasuerus. But all was not yet won. It would have been most unwise for Esther to have burst out with her daring plea for the condemned people in the moment of the king's surprised welcome. But she was patient and skilful in managing her delicate business. She knew the king's weakness for good living, and she played upon it for her great purpose. Even when she had got him to a first banquet, she did not venture to bring out her request. Perhaps her courage failed her at the last moment. Perhaps, like a keen, observant woman, she perceived that she had not yet wheedled the king round to the condition in which it would be safe to approach the dangerous topic. So she postponed her attempt to another day and a second banquet. Then she seized her opportunity. With great tact, she began by pleading for her own life. Her piteous entreaty amazed the dense-minded monarch. At the same time the anger of his pride was roused. Who would dare to touch his favourite queen? It was a well-chosen moment to bring such a notion into the mind of a king who was changeable as a child. We

may be sure that Esther had been doing her very best to please him throughout the two banquets. Then she had Haman on the spot. He, too, prime minister of Persia as he was, had to find that for once in his life he had been outwitted by a woman. Esther meant to strike while the iron was hot. So the arch-enemy of her people was there, that the king might carry out the orders to which she was skilfully leading him on without the delay which would give the party of Haman an opportunity to turn him the other way. Haman saw it all in a moment. He confessed that the queen was mistress of the situation by appealing to her for mercy, in the frenzy of his terror even so far forgetting his place as to fling himself on her couch. That only aggravated the rage of the jealous king. Haman's fate was sealed on the spot. Esther was completely triumphant.

After this it is painful to see how the woman who had saved her people at the risk of her own life pushed her advantage to the extremity of a bloodthirsty vengeance. It is all very well to say that, as the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be altered, there was no alternative but a defensive slaughter. We may try to shelter Esther under the customs of the times; we may call to mind the fact that she was acting on the advice of Mordecai, whom she had been taught to obey from childhood, so that his was by far the greater weight of responsibility. Still, as we gaze on the portrait of the strong, brave, unselfish Jewess, we must confess that beneath all the beauty and nobility of its expression certain hard lines betray the fact that Esther is not a Madonna, that the heroine of the Jews does not reach the Christian ideal of womanhood.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORDECAI.

ESTHER ii. 5, 6; iv. 1, 2; vi. 10, 11; ix. 1-4.

THE hectic enthusiast who inspires Daniel Deronda with his passionate ideas is evidently a reflection in modern literature of the Mordecai of Scripture. It must be admitted that the reflection approaches a caricature. The dreaminess and morbid excitability of George Eliot's consumptive hero have no counterpart in the wise, strong Mentor of Queen Esther; and the English writer's agnosticism has led her to exclude all the Divine elements of the Jewish faith, so that on her pages the sole object of Israelite devotion is the race of Israel. But the very extravagance of the portraiture keenly accentuates what is, after all, the most remarkable trait in the original Mordecai. We are not in a position to deny that this man had a living faith in the God of his fathers; we are simply ignorant as to what his attitude towards religion was, because the author of the Book of Esther draws a veil over the religious relations of all his characters. Still the one thing prominent and pronounced in Mordecai is patriotism, devotion to Israel, the expenditure of thought and effort on the protection of his threatened people.

The first mention of the name of Mordecai introduces

a hint of his national connections. We read, "There was a certain Jew in Shushan the palace, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away." * Curious freaks of exegesis have been displayed in dealing with this passage. It has been thought that the Kish mentioned in it is no other than the father of Saul, in which case the ages of the ancestors of Mordecai must rival those of the antediluvians; and it has been suggested that Mordecai is here represented as one of the original captives from Jerusalem in the reign of Jeconiah, so that at the time of Xerxes he must have been a marvellously old man, tottering on the brink of the grave. On these grounds the genealogical note has been treated as a fanciful fiction invented to magnify the importance of Mordecai. But there is no necessity to take up any such position. It would be strange to derive Mordecai from the far-off Benjamite farmer Kish, who shines only in the reflected glory of his son, whereas we have no mention of Saul himself. There is no reason to say that another Kish may not have been found among the captives. Then it is quite possible to dispose of the second difficulty by connecting the relative clause at the beginning of verse 6—"who had been carried away"—with the nearest antecedent in the previous sentence—viz., "Kish the Benjamite." If we remove the semi-colon from the end of verse 5, the clauses will run on quite smoothly and there will be no reason to go back to the name of Mordecai for the

* Esther ii. 5, 6.

antecedent of the relative ; we can read the words thus —"Kish the Benjamite who had been carried away," etc. In this way all difficulty vanishes. But the passage still retains a special significancc. Mordecai was a true Jew, of the once royal tribe of Benjamin, a descendant of one of the captive contemporaries of Jeconiah, and therefore most likely a scion of a princely house. The preservation of his ancestral record gives us a hint of the sort of mental pabulum on which the man had been nurtured. Living in the palace, apparently as a porter, and possibly as a eunuch of the harem, Mordecai would have been tempted to forget his people. Nevertheless it is plain that he had cherished traditions of the sad past, and trained his soul to cling to the story of his fathers' sufferings in spite of all the distractions and dissipations of a Persian court life. Though in a humbler sphere, he thus resembled Artaxerxes' cup-bearer, the great patriot Nehemiah.

The peculiarity of Mordecai's part in the story is this, that he is the moving spirit of all that is done for the deliverance of Israel at a time of desperate peril without being at first a prominent character. Thus he first appears as the guardian of his young cousin, whom he has cherished and trained, and whom he now introduces to the royal harem where she will play her more conspicuous part. Throughout the whole course of events Mordecai's voice is repeatedly heard, but usually as that of Esther's prompter. He haunts the precincts of the harem, if by chance he may catch a glimpse of his foster child. He is a lonely man now, for he has parted with the light of his home. He has done this voluntarily, unselfishly—first, to advance the lovely creature who has been committed to his charge,

and secondly, as it turns out, for the saving of his people. Even now his chief thought is not for the cheering of his own solitude. His constant aim is to guide his young cousin in the difficult path of her new career. Subsequently he receives the highest honours the king can bestow; but he never seeks them, and he would be quite content to remain in the background to the end, if only his eager desire for the good of his people could be accomplished by the queen who has learnt to lean upon his counsel from her childhood. Such self-effacement is most rare and beautiful. A subtle temptation to self-regarding ambition besets the path of every man who attempts some great public work for the good of others in a way that necessarily brings him under observation. Even though he believes himself to be inspired by the purest patriotism, it is impossible for him not to perceive that he is exposing himself to admiration by the very disinterestedness of his conduct. The rare thing is to see the same earnestness on the part of a person in an obscure place, willing that the whole of his energy should be devoted to the training and guiding of another, who alone is to become the visible agent of some great work.

The one action in which Mordecai momentarily takes the first place throws light on another side of his character. There is a secondary plot in the story. Mordecai saves the king's life by discovering to him a conspiracy. The value of this service is strikingly illustrated by the historical fact that, at a later time, just another such conspiracy issued in the assassination of Xerxes. In the distractions of his foreign expeditions and his abandonment to self-indulgence at home, the king forgets the whole affair, and Mordecai goes on his quiet way as before, never dreaming of the honour

with which it is to be rewarded. Now this incident seems to be introduced to show how the intricate wheels of Providence all work on for the ultimate deliverance of Israel. The accidental discovery of Mordecai's unrequited service when the king is beguiling the long hours of a sleepless night by listening to the chronicles of his reign leads to the recognition of Mordecai and the first humiliation of Haman, and prepares the king for further measures. But the incident reflects a side light on Mordecai in another direction. The humble porter is loyal to the great despot. He is a passionately patriotic Jew; but his patriotism does not make a rebel of him, nor does it permit him to stand aside silently and see a villainous intrigue go on unmolested, even though it is aimed at the monarch who is holding his people in subjection. Mordecai is the humble friend of the great Persian king in the moment of danger. This is the more remarkable when we compare it with his ruthless thirst for vengeance against the known enemies of Israel. It shows that he does not treat Ahasuerus as an enemy of his people. No doubt the writer of this narrative wished it to be seen that the most patriotic Jew could be perfectly loyal to a foreign government. The shining examples of Joseph and Daniel have set the same idea before the world for the vindication of a grossly maligned people, who, like the Christians in the days of Tacitus, have been most unjustly hated as the enemies of the human race. The capacity to adapt itself loyally to the service of foreign governments, without abandoning one iota of its religion or its patriotism, is a unique trait in the genius of this wonderful race. The Zealot is not the typical Jew-patriot. He is a secretion of diseased and decayed

patriotism. True patriotism is large enough and patient enough to recognise the duties that lie outside its immediate aims. Its fine perfection is attained when it can be flexible without becoming servile.

We see that in Mordecai the flexibility of Jewish patriotism was consistent with a proud scorn of the least approach to servility. He would not kiss the dust at the approach of Haman, grand vizier though the man was. It may be that he regarded this act of homage as idolatrous—for it would seem that Persian monarchs were not unwilling to accept the adulation of Divine honours; and the vain minister was aping the airs of his royal master. But, perhaps, like those Greeks who would not humble their pride by prostrating themselves at the bidding of an Oriental barbarian, Mordecai held himself up from a sense of self-respect. In either case it must be evident that he showed a daringly independent spirit. He could not but know that such an affront as he ventured to offer to Haman would annoy the great man. But he had not calculated on the unfathomable depths of Haman's vanity. Nobody who credits his fellows with rational motives would dream that so simple an offence as this of Mordecai's could provoke so vast an act of vengeance as the massacre of a nation. When he saw the outrageous consequences of his mild act of independence, Mordecai must have felt it doubly incumbent upon him to strain every nerve to save his people. Their danger was indirectly due to his conduct. Still he could never have foreseen such a result, and therefore he should not be held responsible for it. The tremendous disproportion between motive and action in the behaviour of Haman is like one of those fantastic freaks that abound in the impossible world of "The

Arabian Nights," but for the occurrence of which we make no provision in real life, simply because we do not act on the assumption that the universe is nothing better than a huge lunatic asylum.

The escape from this altogether unexpected danger is due to two courses of events. One of them—in accordance with the reserved style of the narrative—appears to be quite accidental. Mordecai got the reward he never sought in what seems to be the most casual way. He had no hand in obtaining for himself an honour which looks to us quaintly childish. For a few brief hours he was paraded through the streets of the royal city as the man whom the king delighted to honour, with no less a person than the grand vizier to serve as his groom. It was Haman's silly vanity that had invented this frivolous proceeding. We can hardly suppose that Mordecai cared much for it. After the procession had completed its round, in true Oriental fashion Mordecai put off his gorgeous robes, like a poor actor returning from the stage to his garret, and settled down to his lowly office exactly as if nothing had happened. This must seem to us a foolish business, unless we can look at it through the magnifying glass of an Oriental imagination, and even then there is nothing very fascinating in it. Still it had important consequences. For, in the first place, it prepared the way for a further recognition of Mordecai in the future. He was now a marked personage. Ahasuerus knew him, and was gratefully disposed towards him. The people understood that the king delighted to honour him. His couch would not be the softer nor his bread the sweeter; but all sorts of future possibilities lay open before him. To many men the possibilities of life are more precious than the actualities. We cannot

say, however, that they meant much to Mordecai, for he was not ambitious, and he had no reason to think that the king's conscience was not perfectly satisfied with the cheap settlement of his debt of gratitude. Still the possibilities existed, and before the end of the tale they had blossomed out to very brilliant results.

But another consequence of the pageant was that the heart of Haman was turned to gall. We see him livid with jealousy, inconsolable until his wife—who evidently knows him well—proposes to satisfy his spite by another piece of fanciful extravagance. Mordecai shall be impaled on a mighty stake, so high that all the world shall see the ghastly spectacle. This may give some comfort to the wounded vanity of the grand vizier. But consolation to Haman will be death and torment to Mordecai.

Now we come to the second course of events that issued in the deliverance and triumph of Israel, and therewith in the escape and exaltation of Mordecai. Here the watchful porter is at the spring of all that happens. His fasting, and the earnest counsels he lays upon Esther, bear witness to the intensity of his nature. Again the characteristic reserve of the narrative obscures all religious considerations. But, as we have seen already, Mordecai is persuaded that deliverance will come to Israel from some quarter, and he suggests that Esther has been raised to her high position for the purpose of saving her people. We cannot but feel that these hints veil a very solid faith in the providence of God with regard to the Jews. On the surface of them they show faith in the destiny of Israel. Mordecai not only loves his nation; he believes in it. He is sure it has a future. It has

survived the most awful disasters in the past. It seems to possess a charmed life. It must emerge safely from the present crisis. But Mordecai is not a fatalist whose creed paralyses his energies. He is most distressed and anxious at the prospect of the great danger that threatens his people. He is most persistent in pressing for the execution of measures of deliverance. Still in all this he is buoyed up by a strange faith in his nation's destiny. This is the faith that the English novelist has transferred to her modern Mordecai. It cannot be gainsayed that there is much in the marvellous history of the unique people, whose vitality and energy astonish us even to-day, to justify the sanguine expectation of prophetic souls that Israel has yet a great destiny to fulfil in future ages.

The ugly side of Jewish patriotism is also apparent in Mordecai, and it must not be ignored. The indiscriminate massacre of the "enemies" of the Jews is a savage act of retaliation that far exceeds the necessity of self-defence, and Mordecai must bear the chief blame of this crime. But then the considerations in extenuation of its guilt which have already come under our notice may be applied to him.* The danger was supreme. The Jews were in a minority. The king was cruel, fickle, senseless. It was a desperate case. We cannot be surprised that the remedy was desperate also. There was no moderation on either side, but then "sweet reasonableness" is the last thing to be looked for in any of the characters of the Book of Esther. Here everything is extravagant. The course of events is too grotesque to be gravely weighed in the scales that are

* Page 358.

used in the judgment of average men under average circumstances.

The Book of Esther closes with an account of the establishment of the Feast of Purim and the exaltation of Mordecai to the vacant place of Haman. The Israelite porter becomes grand vizier of Persia! This is the crowning proof of the triumph of the Jews consequent on their deliverance. The whole process of events that issues so gloriously is commemorated in the annual Feast of Purim. It is true that doubts have been thrown on the historical connection between that festival and the story of Esther. It has been said that the word "Purim" may represent the portions assigned by lot, but not the lottery itself; that so trivial an accident as the method followed by Haman in selecting a day for his massacre of the Jews could not give its name to the celebration of their escape from the threatened danger; that the feast was probably more ancient, and was really the festival of the new moon for the month in which it occurs. With regard to all of these and any other objections, there is one remark that may be made here. They are solely of archæological interest. The character and meaning of the feast as it is known to have been celebrated in historical times is not touched by them, because it is beyond doubt that throughout the ages Purim has been inspired with passionate and almost dramatic reminiscences of the story of Esther. Thus for all the celebrations of the feast that come within our ken this is its sole significance.

The worthiness of the festival will vary according to the ideas and feelings that are encouraged in connection with it. When it has been used as an opportunity for cultivating pride of race, hatred, contempt, and gleeful vengeance over humiliated foes, its effect

must have been injurious and degrading. When, however, it has been celebrated in the midst of grievous oppressions, though it has embittered the spirit of animosity towards the oppressor—the Christian Haman in most cases—it has been of real service in cheering a cruelly afflicted people. Even when it has been carried through with no seriousness of intention, merely as a holiday devoted to music and dancing and games and all sorts of merry-making, its social effect in bringing a gleam of light into lives that were as a rule dismally sordid may have been decidedly healthy.

But deeper thoughts must be stirred in devout hearts when brooding over the profound significance of the national festival. It celebrates a famous deliverance of the Jews from a fearful danger. Now deliverance is the keynote of Jewish history. This note was sounded as with a trumpet blast at the very birth of the nation, when, emerging from Egypt no better than a body of fugitive slaves, Israel was led through the Red Sea and Pharaoh's hosts with their horses and chariots were overwhelmed in the flood. The echo of the triumphant burst of praise that swelled out from the exodus pealed down the ages in the noblest songs of Hebrew Psalmists. Successive deliverances added volume to this richest note of Jewish poetry. In all who looked up to God as the Redeemer of Israel the music was inspired by profound thankfulness, by true religious adoration. And yet Purim never became the Eucharist of Israel. It never approached the solemn grandeur of Passover, that prince of festivals, in which the great primitive deliverance of Israel was celebrated with all the pomp and awe of its Divine associations. It was always in the main a secular festival, relegated to the

lower plane of social and domestic entertainments, like an English bank-holiday. Still even on its own lines it could serve a serious purpose. When Israel is practically idolised by Israelites, when the glory of the nation is accepted as the highest ideal to work up to, the true religion of Israel is missed, because that is nothing less than the worship of God as He is revealed in Hebrew history. Nevertheless, in their right place, the privileges of the nation and its destinies may be made the grounds of very exalted aspirations. The nation is larger than the individual, larger than the family. An enthusiastic national spirit must exert an expansive influence on the narrow, cramped lives of the men and women whom it delivers from selfish, domestic, and parochial limitations. It was a liberal education for Jews to be taught to love their race, its history and its future. If—as seems probable—our Lord honoured the Feast of Purim by taking part in it,* He must have credited the national life of His people with a worthy mission. Himself the purest and best fruit of the stock of Israel, on the human side of His being, He realised in His own great mission of redemption the end for which God had repeatedly redeemed Israel. Thus He showed that God had saved His people, not simply for their own selfish satisfaction, but that through Christ they might carry salvation to the world.

Purged from its base associations of blood and cruelty, Purim may symbolise to us the triumph of the Church of Christ over her fiercest foes. The spirit of this triumph must be the very opposite of the spirit of wild vengeance exhibited by Mordecai and his

* John v. 1.

people in their brief season of unwonted elation. The Israel of God can never conquer her enemies by force. The victory of the Church must be the victory of brotherly love, because brotherly love is the note of the true Church. But this victory Christ is winning throughout the ages, and the historical realisation of it is to us the Christian counterpart of the story of Esther.

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